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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN CRISIS

Edited by
John B. Chethimattam

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Interreligious Dialogue in Crisis

Edited by

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CONTENTS

	Page
Editorial	328
Nature and Scope of Interreligious Dialogue Today	331
<i>John B. Chethimattam</i>	
Religious Experience in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures	356
<i>Gerard F. Rafferty</i>	
Atmasakṣatkaṛa and the Experiential Approach to Ethics	364
<i>Anand Mohan</i>	
The Buddhist Vision of Religion as Dhamma	372
<i>Phra Maha Vinit Rajvonk</i>	
Faith and Religious Experience in African Religion	379
<i>Emmanuel C. Eze</i>	
Thomas Merton and the East: A Westerner's Quest for Transcultural consciousness	395
<i>Paul Veliyathil</i>	

Editorial

Today there is a growing realization that interreligious dialogue is in deep trouble. The encounter of religions with their age old traditions, ancient sacred texts and the long line of saints, has come to be trivialized, since people from differing religious backgrounds do not ask what each religion can contribute or what their unique and special contribution is towards the solution of man's basic existential problems, but look only for the lowest common denominator of religions. Lest one religion or another should assume an air of superiority over the others and lead to unhealthy religious rivalries and conflicts, no religion is allowed to make any special claims or proclaim any special message. Thus the pluralism of religions which dialogue started out to defend is destroyed and all the radically different religious perspectives are reduced to uniformity of some bland humanistic religion.

This is a backlash of the Medieval Scholastics' attempt to reduce all divine revelation to communication of Truth. According to them God disclosed the fullness of Truth in Jesus Christ, and the divine mysteries he revealed lead us to the contemplation of God face to face after death. So Christianity was defended as the only "true religion". But the present era that was inaugurated after World War II, with the emergence into world consciousness of a number of ancient religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam which provide answers to the basic problems of existence to a good majority of human beings in the world, made it impossible to write them off as pure error or underdeveloped truth. Once it was recognized that other religions also contained truth, the tendency naturally was to count all religions as particular means towards the Infinite Truth. Besides theology itself radically changed from the Scholastic times. The global theoretical vision of the Medieval *Summas* has been replaced by a theology from below, kindred to the experiential religions of the East. Recognizing the presence and work of the Spirit in all hearts it seeks through suffering, conflict and doubt to free human beings from sin and bondage and to move towards the fellowship

of all human beings in the tri-personal God. This liberative vision integrates in its movement the Buddhist insight of the emptiness of things, the prophetism of Israel and Islam, and the Hindu vision of the Atman, the inner self. There is only one order of salvation for all children of God today, and that is of the God-given gifts of faith and grace and the fellowship of all in the mansion of the Father.

Then what is unique for each religion? Why preach the Gospel? Why should there be even a dialogue among religions if they are all based on the same faith experience and the presence and work of the Spirit dwelling in all human hearts? The faith experience common to all believers in order to be relevant and effective has to find its definitive expression in the various coordinates of human life, its historical, psychological, social, transcendental and other dimensions. If Hinduism says that one who realizes Brahman as one's own Atman definitively attains liberation, Christianity focuses attention on the historical dimension: Man is not a purely spiritual being but a body-soul composite with a life in history. Hence the return of the human race to its original source has to find its definitive fulfilment in the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God who entered human history. Though all have the witness of God in their hearts, that inner experience has to be translated into personal and social life (Rom. 1:19-23). So Christianity claims to be "news", communication of what actually happened in history through the incarnation of the Son of God: "How can they believe in him of whom they have not heard, and how can they hear without some one to preach? And how can people preach if they are not sent?" asks St. Paul (Rom. 10:14-15). So the truth of one religion does not deny the truth of another, nor does the definitiveness and uniqueness of one religion relativize another.

In this issue of *Jeevadhara* we try to face this modern crisis of interreligious dialogue. Religions have to be open to one another in the areas of theology giving the reason for the faith, in morals by jointly supporting the righteous living of people, in mission, cooperating in the effective common pursuit of truth, as well as in worship bringing together the wealth of symbolism of all traditions to celebrate the incomprehensible reality of the future

of man. In my introductory article I trace briefly the development of dialogue to its present stage. Gerard Rafferty explains the Biblical approach to religious experience, while Dr. Anand Mohan and Prahmaha Vinit in their respective articles examine the unique visions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Emmanuel Eze shows the unique and special feature of African religious tradition in bringing out the universal religious experience of humanity. Paul Veliyathil speaks of Thomas Merton's fruitful meeting with the East. The scope of dialogue is not to denigrate one tradition and extol another, but rather to present each religion in its uniqueness and completeness.

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Nature and Scope of Interreligious Dialogue Today

The post-world war era has given a fillip to interreligious dialogue and understanding among people of different faiths, if not among religions themselves. When many great nations, kept under domination for centuries by Western colonial powers, gained their independence and came up to build world communities, their ancient religions also gained world attention. The explosion of Western missionary activity starting with the sixteenth century was not an unmixed religious phenomenon. Very much like the spread of Islam almost a millennium earlier, the missionary enterprise of Portugal, Spain, Holland and Britain was a sequel to their political expansionism. With the disappearance of colonialism at the end of the II World War a political adjustment among the nations was on the way through the United Nations' Organization. A similar re-adjustment is taking place in interreligious dialogue. The different attitudes and approaches to the relationship among religions, which appear to be rather ambiguous and at times even contradictory today' have to be examined and evaluated in this context.

The source of the great diversity of approaches to inter-religious dialogue, is, first of all, the understanding of religion itself. For some it is simply a way for attaining salvation, which itself is differently understood by different people. For some others it is the sum total of man's relationship with the Supreme Being. For yet others religion is a system of truths grasped through a method different from that of reason and philosophy. Finally, there are those who consider religion a reification and institutionalization of faith which is a spontaneous response to the Divine. According to these radically different understandings of religion, the attitude to dialogue with other religions too differs.

The challenge one is actually facing at the moment is understandably a diversifying factor. Today theology is problem oriented, and hence the plague one is fighting in one's neighbourhood decides the perspective of the field to a great extent. The many religious wars that pitted people of one faith against those of another are the great scandal of history. The Jewish Holocaust of World War II is the most outrageous example of the irrational hatred directed against a people precisely for its religious label. The recent surge of religious fundamentalism absolutizing a written religious text or a particular tradition and the consequences of such an irrational stand form the major problem faced by those who are studying religions. An outstanding concern is to avoid all semblance of triumphalism and pretence of superiority of one group over others. To understand a particular theological stand we have to consider the opposing view against which it is proposed. The particular scope one has in view in entering into dialogue with other religions is another important source of diversity. For most people who have an authentic religious experience the scope of dialogue is to communicate the good news of one's experience to others. There are people beset with problems and doubts, who seek out others to learn from them. The desire of people who face common a problem from different angles of experience for making their own unique contributions to it may be a third motive for dialogue. Often the unexpressed motive determines the tone and direction of the conversation.

I

Approach to Religious Pluralism in the Past

Among the most ancient documents showing the nature and scope of interreligious dialogue should be counted the Rock Edicts VII and XII of Emperor Asoka who lived some three centuries before Christ: 'King Priyadarsi wishes members of all faiths to live everywhere in his kingdom. For they all seek mastery of the senses and purity of mind. Men are different in their inclinations and passions, however, and they may perform the whole of their duties or only part.'¹ 'King Priyadarsi honors men of all

1 *The Edicts of Asoka*, ed. & trsl. N. A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, Chicago & London: Phoenix Books, 1966, Rock Edict VII, p. 51. "Priyadarsi" is the self-designation of Asoka in his edicts.

faiths, members of religious orders and laymen alike, with gifts and various marks of esteem. Yet he does not value either gifts or honors as much as growth in the qualities essential to religion in men of all faiths. This growth may take many forms, but its root is in guarding one's speech to avoid extolling one's own faith and disparaging the faith of others improperly or, when the occasion is appropriate, immoderately. The faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another. By honoring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and also does disservice to that of others". (Edict XII)

The common goal of all religions according to Siddhartha Gautama Buddha was getting rid of suffering, by controlling the desire which produced it, through the practice of the eightfold path. Existence of God, the immortality of the soul and similar metaphysical questions were thought to be irrelevant and distracting to the pursuit of liberation. So the solutions proposed by other religions could easily be adopted as dimensions of one's own faith.

Christians found the fulfilment of all religion in the history of human salvation culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christianity itself was born in a situation of dialogue. Originating from the bosom of Judaism and experiencing persecution from the defenders of the old religion, on the one hand, and welcoming converts from the Graeco-Roman religions, on the other, the Apostles, the original leaders of Christianity, had a very delicate task of defining their relationship to other religions. They are uncompromising in declaring the definitive character of the "good news" they preached, the salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ, once and for all, for the whole human race: In spite of the crime of the Jews who crucified Jesus, God has kept his side of the promise made to humanity, raised Jesus from the dead, and made him Son and Savior (Acts 2:36). There is no other name under heaven given to human race to be saved, except the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12). Though in former times the gentiles had a law written in their hearts to follow, in Jesus' death and resurrection a new order of salvation for all humanity is established (Rom. 1:21; 2:16; Acts 11:42; 14:16; 17:31).

But the Apostles do not tolerate the particularism and exclusivism of the old Jewish religion which tended to restrict salvation to the "chosen people". Against his own natural inclination Peter, the leader of the Apostles, declares to the gentile Cornelius and his companions: "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears Him and acts uprightly is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:34-35). Confronted with the demand from Jewish Christians that the divinely decreed Abrahamic ceremony of circumcision as well as the Mosaic law should be imposed also on the Gentile Christians, the Apostles go back to the universalism of the prophets, who declared that God wants the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. So they decide that the ceremonial and dietary laws peculiar to the Jewish tradition should not be imposed on the Gentile converts, thus making a clear distinction between what is essential to Christian faith and what is accidental (Acts. ch. 15).

The political impact on the encounter of religions

If one looks at the history of inter-religious dialogue it becomes clear that a good part of the reaction of one religion and its followers towards people of other faiths was determined by the political concerns of the times. When Islam started out in the 8th century C. E., it was a religion closely allied to the political fortunes of the long oppressed Arab tribes. The religious movement started by Muhammad was principally against the powerful Byzantine empire to the North, the Persian empire to the East and the Abyssinian kingdom to the West. The newly gained religious insight of Muhammad and the Qur'an revealed to him were a cry to replace the old blood relationship of the tribal culture with a faith relationship under Allah, the one true God. Having gained most of his religious ideas from Christians and Jews, Muhammad showed some respect for the "People of the Book" and yet claimed that both of them had corrupted their Scriptures. So Islam claimed for itself the right and task to impose God's law in God's world. This militant approach of Islam to other religions evoked a confrontational response from other religions, especially Christianity. Several Popes organized crusades to liberate the Holy Land from Muslim powers. Some Christian theologians considered Islam so erroneous that they opined that if Muslims refused to accept

Christianity they could be captured as slaves and forcibly converted.

Pope Boniface VIII, in his widely discussed Bull *Unam Sanctam* stating the supremacy of the spiritual over the temporal power, in its closing sentence affirmed that it was necessary to salvation that every creature should be subject to the Roman Pontiff. He made the most exclusivist statement about Christianity: "We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church; we firmly believe and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins". When Europeans came to the Americas they used the same exclusivist doctrine for demanding that all the Amerindians, in spite of their ancient religious traditions, should become Christians or be reduced to slaves. The same exclusivist conception of truth enunciated as a principle: "Error has no right", dictated the religiously motivated burning of witches and heretics in the Middle Ages. Since Christianity was the one divinely revealed and true religion, other religions had to be error, and so could not be tolerated.

The same political outlook, in a very subtle manner, characterised the attitudes and approaches of Hinduism to other religions. For it the principal task of religion and the one means to liberation was to realize God as the one really Real, and everything else only practically and relatively real. But this realization had to be achieved individually through each one's psychological development. Religion could not contribute anything positive towards it, but only remove the obstacles by psychological and social organization. The psychological discipline leading towards liberation indicated the four stages in one's life: First came the period of inquiry and learning in studenthood, and then adulthood as a householder, realizing the three normal goals of life, wealth, pleasure and righteousness. One had then to search for the ultimate meaning of life in retirement, and finally as an ascetic realize God as one's own Self. The same scheme was followed in society through the four castes: the Sudras working as servants, the Vaisyas cultivating land and doing business, Kshatriyas engaged in warfare and Brahmins committed to the study and teaching of sacred doctrine representing the liberated soul. So *varnaśramadharma*, duty dictated by one's stage in life and particular caste, constituted the essence of Hinduism as a religion.

In encountering other religions Hinduism maintained throughout history its own unique conception of religion. It was not very much worried about doctrinal diversity, within its own ranks as well as in other religions. After all, doctrine is an expression of one's inner experience. In view of the ultimate goal of reaching an intuitive realization of the divine Self, every particular doctrine is imperfect and inadequate. It is just part of our constant, futile and yet necessary attempts to express the inexpressible as a practical means to get through the practical existence. From the part of Hinduism there was a lot of give and take among its own sects and in interaction with other religions in myths, morals, philosophical ideas and ritual. But the ultimate ideal of religion remained *Atmasakṣatkāra*, realization of one's own ultimate self. What could be higher than an intuitive and direct realization of the divine reality as One-without-a-second?

So Hinduism as a whole had only a very moderate interest in dialogue. Though the emergence of one or other religion like Buddhism, Jainism and Islam, created a temporary shock, and created social and psychological dislocations, Hindu leaders looked upon these religions with a certain condescension and tolerance. When they could not be eliminated through political vicissitudes, they were either absorbed as subordinate religions like the great many village cults and tribal religions, or were benignly accommodated and ignored as pertaining to one or other of the lower rungs of the caste ladder. Doctrinal discussions were useful only to defend one's position against an adversary or to show the inadmissibility of a particular position or school of thought. They could never be conducive to God-realization.

II

Truth as Focus of Interreligious Dialogue

The focus of interreligious dialogue radically changed when the Medieval Scholastics reduced divine revelation mostly to communication of certain truths about God. Revelation was defined as formal speech and hence the communication of statements like: there are three Persons in one God; and, the second Person of the Trinity became man in the incarnation. Man is man by his rational faculties of intellect and will, and their ultimate object is the infinite reality of God, which, however, people understand only

with difficulty and often their ideas are mixed with error. So revelation communicates to man knowledge concerning his ultimate end, even truths that transcend the natural capacity of reason. When these are revealed, reason finds itself at home in them since they answer to its deepest needs and fulfill it in a way that man could not know or expect. Hence encounter with other religions became very much a comparison of Christian "truths" with their teachings in order to establish the superiority of Christian doctrine over them (see e.g. St. Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1,6,4).

This emphasis on "truths" radically affected the understanding of Christianity's mission and relationship with other religions. If the Gospel is truth, infallible truth, then every other religion has to be error or at best some imperfect understanding of the truth. This militant approach to other religions is evidenced by the history of the Church's mission work, especially in India. The whole missionary effort concentrated on the errors and abuses of other religions. Christian missionaries constantly thundered against idolatry, superstition and widow-burning etc. in Hinduism, completely ignoring the positive contributions made by other religions for fostering the faith of their followers. The Hindu Reformers of the 19th century like Raja Rammohan Roy, Kesub Chunder Sen and Pratap Sunder Majumdar, recognized the truth of such accusations. But their response was equally superficial picking up elements from Christianity like its moral teaching, discipline, and the human example of Christ to correct the social abuses of their own religion without paying much attention to the substantive message of Christ and his personality. Hindu apologists like Swami Vivekananda and Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan went on alleging that Western materialism and the lack of deep spiritual experience were all endemic to Christianity.

The World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, on the other hand, stated that Hinduism was not one religion but many and the absence of any formulated creed or body of doctrine made it possible for it to hold within its embrace a number of inconsistent and even contradictory views and doctrines². In 1913 J. N. Farquhar in his *The Crown of Hinduism* applies the

2 Wesley Ariarajah S., *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1991, pp. 17-31

criterion of truth and states that in the present age of a world culture all religions were weighed, and all except Christianity were found wanting! He claims that though every religion has some truth, Christianity alone has the full truth. According to him, since religions like Hinduism are very much tied to customs and traditions, at a time of crisis they would all fall apart, and that only Christianity could weather a crisis. But this optimism about Christianity's superiority in times of crisis was somewhat dimmed by the tragic World War I which broke out in Christian Europe, the very next year, in 1914.

In the second World Missionary Conference held at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, over Easter 1928, the main question was what the Christian message meant for the whole world, what its content was, and how the Christians viewed other religions. Nicol MacNicol, a missionary of the United Free Church of Scotland in Poona, a reputed scholar in Hinduism, warned the conference that Hinduism was not all fear of demons and superstition. "Because of its long recorded history, because of the profundity of the speculation of its ancient sages, and because of the power that these ideas still exercise over the lives of multitudes in this land, it demands to be treated with complete respect and is not afraid at times to claim to be possessed of a higher truth than any of its rivals". Against those who kept pointing out the social evils of Hinduism, he said: "I do not believe that it would be fair to say that the social system of Hinduism is Hinduism. It rests in large measure on the ideas which, I believe, truly represent the religion". For MacNicol Hinduism itself was the best way to Christ, and what Christians should tell the Hindus is that Christianity "is a religion which rests upon a conviction that the Ultimate Reality is an infinitely loving and holy personality whom we call Father, and who has been revealed to men supremely in the life and death of Jesus Christ". P. Chenchiah, a Hindu convert to Christianity, defended MacNicol's position and said that Christians should deal with the more developed ideas in Hinduism, respond to the finest fruits of Hindu religion and culture. For, "while Christianity is challenging Hinduism at its base, Hinduism is challenging Christianity at the top". But the general sense of the conference was that Christianity was not simply the higher climax of the same movement which is seen in other religions, and that all

religions including Christianity are ultimately judged by the unique historical revelation given to human beings in Jesus Christ³.

The International Missionary Council which met at Tambaram, near Madras, 12-29 December 1938 continued the same line of thinking. It was very much dominated by Hendrik Kraemer, a Dutch missionary in Indonesia who wrote *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* in preparation for the Tambaram conference. His point was that "any religion should be taken as one whole body of religious life and expression". The Christian revelation as the record of God's self-disclosing revelation in Jesus Christ, is absolutely *sui generis*, and hence there is a sharp discontinuity between the natural religions and God's revelation in Jesus Christ. So how noble and sublime so ever be the Hindu religious tradition, one has first to die to that religion in order to embrace the divine revelation in Christ. He was very much opposed to the smooth transition to Christ from the positive content of other religions, advocated by people like Ernest Hocking and P. Chenchiah⁴.

A few months later, in 1939, there broke out the World War II which dealt a shattering blow to European reliance on history. Meanwhile Karl Barth, reacting strongly to his teachers who saw Christianity as one form of religion alongside others, presented an extremely exclusivistic theology of Christianity. It made a distinction between religion, the human effort to reach God, and revelation, God's spontaneous self-disclosure to humanity. The vocation of Christians was to bear witness to Christian truth, which made all other religions irrelevant. Emile Brunner and H. Kraemer who took up the same method of theologizing softened Barth's position a little. According to them while the other religions were man's aspiration to reach God, Christianity was God's response to the same aspirations. The religions presented God's universal revelation, though somewhat obscured by human sin and ignorance, while Jesus presented the fullness of Truth!

Inclusivistic thinking in the Postwar Era

The shattering of Western confidence in history and the emergence of good many independent nations and their religions in Asia and Africa made the exclusivistic conception of Christianity

3 *Ibid.* pp. 32-51

4. *Ibid.* pp. 52-88

as the sole way of salvation extremely untenable. It appeared as the symbol and remnant of Western imperialism. The focus shifted from the unique historical revelation in Christ to the person of Christ himself. In Jesus all religions including Christianity were brought to judgement. Christians have no monopoly of Christ. The motive for bearing witness to him was not to make the followers of other religions, Christians, but simply to present Christ to them so that he becomes the point of reconception for their own religions⁵. In December 1956 an all-India Catholic conference was held in Madras with the theme: "India and the Fullness of Christ". The papers focussed attention on the question: What can Christ give to India, and what can we Christians learn from Hinduism and other religions?

Karl Rahner is reputed as the major architect of the Catholic transition from exclusivism to inclusivism. He still held: "Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right"⁶. But until Christianity enters historically in individual's life his knowledge of God "contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given... For this reason a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a lawful religion"⁷. Hence Christianity does not see a member of another religion as simply a non-Christian, but as someone who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian"⁸. He felt, however, that ascribing a positive role to non-Christian religions themselves in mediating salvation was going too far⁹. Raimundo Panikkar in his popular book *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, argued that the Hindu concept of *Iśvara* or *Saguna Brahman* was equivalent to the Christian idea of Christ/Logos. So both Christianity and Hinduism, which claimed to be absolute religions holding salvation for all human beings could agree. "The good and bona fide Hindu is saved by Christ and not by Hinduism, but it is through the Sacraments of Hinduism, through the Mystery that comes to him through Hinduism, that Christ saves the Hindu normally"¹⁰. This line of reasoning, however, was seen

5 D. T. Niles, *Upon the Earth: The Mission of God and the Missionary Enterprise of the Churches*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1962

6 *Theological Investigations* vol. V, p. 118

7 *Ibid.* p. 121.

8. *Ibid.* p. 131.

9. *Vidyajyoti*, 1973 p. 97

10 *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, '64 p.54

as too condescending for any meaningful Christian dialogue with other religions.

III

Dialogue in the Age of Religious Pluralism

With the emergence of liberation movements in various countries, politics of domination from above was replaced by the politics of people's power. The struggle was no longer to maintain and expand the power that existed, but rather to capture power that did not exist, and reach out for the unattainable. The tone of theology also radically changed. The Latin American Liberation Theology gained world attention with the Medellin Bishops' Conference of 1968. Religion was no longer considered the sum total of relationships between man and God, and man and man. Religion is essentially faith-experience of the Transcendent, the substance of things we hope for. So Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued in good many books and articles, that religions are simply the "reification" and even fossilization of faith. So any meaningful dialogue should not be between different religious systems but among people of different faiths who honestly endeavour to attain a better understanding of the divine reality. The scope of dialogue is not at all communicating a message or good news, but rather struggling together to gain a view of the Incomprehensible, attaining Truth!

Raimundo Panikkar became the principal spokesman of this new approach to dialogue. He shifted the focus from Jesus of Nazareth and historical Christianity to the divine Logos. "It is precisely because I take seriously Christ's affirmation that he is the way, the truth and the life that I cannot reduce his significance only to historical Christianity"¹¹. One should not absolutize Christianity so as to consider its truth an exclusive claim monopolizing salvation. In the effort to find out and express the truth

11 Raimundo Panikkar, "The Category of Growth in Comparative Religion: A Critical Self-Examination" *Harvard Theological Review* LXVI (1973) 113-140; A number of authors express ideas similar to that of Panikkar, see e. g. Robley E. Whitson, *The Coming Convergence of World Religions*, New York: Newman Press, 1971; William Johnston, *The Still Point: Reflections of Zen and Christian Mysticism*, New York: Harper & Row, 1971; Heinrich Dumoulin, *Christianity Meets Buddhism*, La Sailer Open Court, 1974; Klaus Klostermaier, *In the Paradise of Krishna: Hindu and Christian Seekers*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969

one should not discard as devilish either Hindu or Christian tradition. "The ultimate religious fact does not lie in the realm of doctrine or even of individual self-consciousness and therefore it can – and well may – be present everywhere and in every religion, although its 'explicitation' may require varied degrees of discovery, realization, evangelization, revelation, hermeneutics etc." (p. 115). Kerygma, the proclamation of the message of faith, the mainstay of traditional dialogue, is out of the question. According to Panikkar faith has to be de-kerygmaticized. For the proclamation of the message should not be identified "with the reality that religions aim at disclosing". Jesus is, after all, one particular expression of the divine Logos, who can have any number of other expressions. The primordial theandric fact, which is manifested and at work everywhere, just appears in a certain fullness in Jesus. The Christian doctrine is only a crystallization in a specific thought pattern, which in the beginning was either Jewish or gentile. The very elaborate nature of the Christian thought system at present is only an added reason to get out of its isolation and complaisance and reach out to meet other religious traditions and learn from them: "I personally cannot subscribe to an opinion which monopolizes God, the Logos, Christ, and Jesus and sets the rules of how the Kingdom of God has to work"¹².

It is not a comparison of different religious systems nor a phenomenological analysis of the various psychological and social factors that form a religious tradition: "There is in existence a conception of the science of religions which is drained of life, sterilized, one might say, and constantly liable to stop short at the level of phenomenon – a conception that consists in viewing religions simply and solely as historical data judged with reference to their cultural manifestations. The result of this is to identify in practice a given religion with its sociological form, i. e. with the 'clothing' it assumes in history in a particular milieu"¹³. What is, instead, required for the study of religion is an experiential approach: "In order to elaborate a theology of religion, we need not only to take religions seriously but also to experience them from within, to believe, in one way or another,

¹² *Ibid* p. 122

¹³ Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man; Icon, Person, Mystery*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973

in what those religions say... Religions are not purely objectifiable data; they are also essentially personal and thus subjective"¹⁴.

What is needed for interreligious dialogue is a common language, meaningful to different partners; some one or something that conveys salvation; and a starting word taken from one's own original faith. "Since no religious tradition catches hold of the whole human being so as to leave no room for intercommunication and dialogue", even with the fundamental religious sense one can step into the shoes of a man of another faith. So interreligious dialogue is essentially the fusing of the experience of one's own religious faith with the religious experience of another! "In terms of ethical, social and religious effect, it is finally the meeting of believers as believers that is significant. For believers precisely as believers raise the further questions beyond the history of religions, the questions of living and acting"¹⁵. Hence it is not the encounter between two well defined religious traditions in history, with their specific texts and practices; it is not a discussion about religions; but the meeting of religious believers, who with a purely subjective understanding of their respective traditions strive together towards a deeper realization of the ultimate object and meaning of religious experience. In fact the particular religious traditions, systems and structures are left behind as inadequate "reifications" of a past faith, which has very little relevance to the future.

The redefined scope of dialogue

The new understanding of religion as reification of faith in a way redefines the scope of dialogue itself. Since religious pluralism is today a recognized fact, and there is no hope of bringing all religious perspectives into one, the important task is perceived as eliminating clashes and conflicts among religions. World Fellowship of Inter-Religious Councils, a registered society, informally approved by the CBCI has described the following points as objectives of interreligious dialogue: 1) Denounce and oppose injustice and atrocities perpetuated in the name of religion; 2) strive for international fellowship of religions; 3) identify areas of differences and work for diffusing tensions, violence

¹⁴ R. Panikkar, "The Category of Growth in Comparative Religion", 1c p. 132

¹⁵ Vernon Gregson, Lonergan, *Spirituality and the Meeting of Religions*, Lanham MD, University Press of America, 1985, p. 3

etc; 4) develop greater understanding between different religious traditions; 5) renew the hope for the future of human race; and, 6) change the oppressive structures in human society, which exploit the poor. What is significantly absent among these objectives is the basic objective of all dialogue, to present the participants to each other in their unique individualities, making clear what each one can contribute positively. The coming together of people of different religious traditions should have more positive goals to achieve, than merely avoiding conflicts and being nice to each other as at a club.

Paul Knitter has the following ground rules for dialogue: 1) People involved in dialogue should have something to say and "must be able to speak from their own religious convictions", though this does not mean crystal clarity or total commitment for everything they say; 2) "The eagerness one has to persuade or convert one's dialogue partners has to be matched by a willingness to be converted by them"; 3) "With our imagination, our feelings, our actions we have to pass over to the other tradition's way of seeing the world and the Ultimate"; and, 4) one has to enter the dialogue "recognizing that no religion has the final answer or the last word for all the others"¹⁶. This last condition is clearly unacceptable to many religions, especially Christianity. Knitter admits that as far as Christians are concerned, it does clearly "contradict previous teaching of the church" and it is startlingly new. Still according to him, it "does not necessarily mean that it is out of line"¹⁷. According to Knitter, the primary intent of all the "one and only" language about Jesus in the New Testament, was to say something positive about Jesus, not to say something negative about others.

But, not surprisingly, a concern for "truth" is the reason for reducing the finality and unsurpassability of Jesus and his redemptive work, the central point of all New Testament writings, to a statement merely of the universal significance and indispensability of Jesus' message and mission. For one has to accept the possibility "that there may be truth in other religions which

16 Brennan R. Hill, Paul Knitter & William Madges, *Faith, Religion and Theology, A Contemporary Introduction*, Mystic, CT, Twentythird Publications, 1990, p. 204

17 *Ibid* p. 213

has not been revealed to humankind in Jesus Christ. There may be more truth about God or the Ultimate, or about human nature and how we are to live, than has been made known in Jesus Christ"¹⁸. If Christians and followers of other religions are striving for the attainment of the full truth, the finite humanity of Christ could not exhaust all truth. So Christians should be willing to learn that truth through dialogue.

The crisis of interreligious dialogue today

There is no doubt that the present orientation of interreligious dialogue is entirely new and is a total reversal of its past understanding and scope. It has definitely eased the tensions that arose from the confrontation and rivalries among different religions. Freed from their allegiance to particular religious traditions, their respective heritage of beliefs, practices and moral prescriptions, people feel free to search for the meaning of their life drawing inspiration from all available sources. Since no religion can have any exclusive claim for a definitive message or specific system with regard to religious problems, it is hoped that a common religion of all humanity without any walls and barriers and privileged territories will eventually emerge. But the crucial question here is whether this new approach really serves the cause of religion.

The simple fact recognized by many is that interreligious dialogue conducted with the new perspective has failed to meet the expectations. According to some it is now gasping for breath¹⁹. Dialogue has now degenerated into a discussion of the lowest common denominator among religions, and that has produced a purely humanistic religion. Since by principle, one cannot bring into the discussion the unique and specific claims of each religion as too divisive, the partners are often left with common platitudes, innocent symbols and social tradition. Each religion arose at a particular moment in history, embraced a special type of philosophical outlook on the world, and proposed its own model of salvation for humanity. If these are left out – and they have to be,

18 Paul Knitter, "Theological Foundations for Interreligious Dialogue" in *As We Are One, Essays and 8 Poems in honour of Bede Griffiths*, ed. Barrice Bruteau, Pfafftown, NC: Philosopher's Exchange, 1991, pp. 151–52

19 Felix Wilfred, "Dialogue Gasping for Breath? Towards New Frontiers in Inter-religious Dialogue" *Vidyajyoti*, 51 (1987) 446–66

since all unique claims and special messages are prohibited in dialogue – what is there left to catch the imagination of people today? So Felix Wilfred told the FABC meeting: “Every religion should re-interpret its own symbols and re-work constantly its interpretative framework so as to perceive and integrate new experiences and situations... given the role of religion in culture and in the maintenance of the order of society through its symbolic language the religions should individually and collectively create new and innovative symbols which will reflect new experiences and sustain the society in equality and justice”²⁰. But any “re-interpretation” can only be of the original insight, symbols and claims of the religion in response to the challenges of the present times. But if one excludes from dialogue the definitive and absolutist claims originally made by Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, what is there to reinterpret!

Raimundo Panikkar reports that a “benevolent” Hindu critic stated that Panikkar’s presentation of Christianity was actually a Hindu interpretation of Christianity. Perhaps this may be the most crucial criticism of the new understanding of religion and interreligious dialogue as a whole. A “Hindu” interpretation of Christianity cannot do adequate justice to Christianity, just as a Christian interpretation of Hinduism will only distort Hinduism. As George Rupp states, “any dialogue is an inherently critical enterprise because it unavoidably entails a process of mutual appraisal”²¹. Perhaps the most radical misunderstanding in the modern approach to religious dialogue is the very idea of religion. Panikkar and Knitter and all the others who claim to be sponsors of the radically new vision of interreligious dialogue, define religion as the quest for the absolute and infinite Truth. Since no particular system, which every religion is, can grasp the infinite truth, they are essentially finite and incomplete and has to be completed by other religions. As Buddhism and Jainism have constantly emphasized religion is not a search for an Infinite Object out there, whatever you may call it, God, or Brahman or Allah. They claim that religion is the search for the liberation of man from suffering and ignorance. Religion is a human

20 *Ibid* p. 466

21 George Rupp, “Religious Pluralism in the Cotext of an Emerging World Culture”. *Harvard Theological Review*. 66 (1973) 207–218

phenomenon, man's realization of the ultimate meaning of his existence. As Vatican Council II clearly stated the definitive revelation in Jesus Christ was not to disclose some esoteric information about God, but to reveal man to man, and to say that only in the fellowship of the three Persons in God one could attain final fulfilment. The Council finds the value of the other religions not in their specific contribution to an experience of the Infinite, but for their unique ways of approaching the basic existential questions of man. If any one religion cannot have an adequate grasp of the Infinite Truth, all of them together also will not be able to have it. It will be very much like five blind men trying to present a composite picture of an elephant. The finite human being does not need all truths or the infinite Truth for his fulfilment.

But this does not mean that religions are only tentative expressions and partial realizations of man's religious quest. Every religion claims to be a definitive answer to the problem of the salvation of all human beings. But in this they do not contradict each other, since each one has its specific way of approaching the problem. Buddhism claims that Buddha through his illumination under the bodhi tree and his Varanasi sermon on the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path set the dharma wheel turning for all humanity. As Vatican II points out, the unique contribution of Buddhism is that it points out "the radical insufficiency of this shifting world... and teaches a path to reach absolute freedom or attain supreme enlightenment". It does in no way contradict the definitiveness of an enlightened Hindu Guru's declaration to his disciple: "That art thou!" When Christianity says that in the death and resurrection of Jesus the salvation of the whole human race is once and for all realized, it does not mean that the humanity of Jesus was infinite divinity. It only says that the human race is one, and has a common destiny, and that when one human individual was able to say "Abba" in humanity's name, human history is radically changed and put directly under the headship of the Son of God. It is not merely a piece of contingent truth that depends exclusively on what actually happened at a particular place at a particular time in the past, since any amount of historical testimony cannot prove an essentially transcendental reality. It is expressing the faith-meaning of what happened, and also at the same time appealing to the will of the

believers that this is the only path human salvation can take. This in no way contradicts the definitiveness of Islam, which claims that the Qur'an is the effective presence of God's Law in humanity's midst. The nature of the definitiveness and universality of the claim of each religion has to be explained in the light of its whole world vision. They cannot be counted and compared on the same plane like apples and oranges since they are radically different though they all appeal to the ultimate concerns of man.

What is totally anomalous in the present approach to dialogue with other religions is the assumption that "If one religious community begins a conversation with another community by claiming or just thinking that its God or its revelation or its savior is the standard of truth... it destroys the dialogue before it can even get off the ground"²². This means that we can go to dialogue with others only if we are convinced that our religion is imperfect and inadequate, and that we have to be corrected and fulfilled by others. This is the reverse of the old missionary argument: "Because I have the Gospel, and I am right, everybody else should be wrong". Now Knitter and others are saying, "Because the Hindus and Buddhists are right, I should be wrong". If the precondition for dialogue is to admit that there are "inherent limitations of God's self-communication through Jesus Christ"²³, and that we cannot "claim any kind of ultimacy for any of the articulations of our own faith-experience"²⁴, then dialogue is suicidal for Christianity.

Gordon D. Kaufman, professor of divinity at the Harvard Divinity School in his convocation address of 1991 takes this idea of interreligious dialogue as a groping for ultimate truth to its ultimate conclusions. "Paradoxically it is in terms of that which is beyond our ken that we must, in the last analysis, understand ourselves." But such questions like ultimate meaning, the truly good life, the "mysteries" that surround our life, are matters at the very limits of our intellectual capacities; we are involved with profound puzzles, conundrums that we will never

22 Paul Knitter, *Faith, Religion and Theology*, p. 209

23 Statement of Indian Theological Association 13th Annual meeting 1989, no 19 in *Religious Pluralism, An Indian Christian Perspective*, ed. Kuncheria Pathil 1989, p. 344

24 *Ibid* 20

solve and we should not expect to solve. For Kaufman mystery simply means the mysterious, "fundamentally an intellectual term, not an experiential one". One should not pretend to find answers to them by appealing to revelation, tradition, authoritative teaching, or to Gurus and sages, "not only because they flagrantly violate modern democratic conceptions and ideals, but also because they seriously compromise the understanding that in religious myths and symbols and in theological doctrines and reflection, we are dealing with matters of profound, ultimately unfathomable mystery. Since the ultimate meaning of human life, the final truth about the world and our place within it, is simply not available to us humans, it is presumptuousness of the highest order for any individuals or groups to make claims to special knowledge on such matters".

The only course of action open to us is dialogue among all interested parties, not exegesis of Scriptural texts, not personal reflection in the interior of one's heart, "but rather free-flowing, open, and unfettered conversation". This free-flowing conversation supposes that one is just a participant in a developing texture of words and ideas, where the model of truth is never final or complete or unchanging. But the only institutional context in which such free-flowing conversation free of all Scriptures and sages and prophets and traditions "is to be found in our great liberal universities"²⁵.

One can easily see that Professor Kaufman is speaking with the problem created by fundamentalists principally in view. An absolutization of the written word with no concern for the inherent need for appropriate interpretation of its meaning has created serious distortions of the religious outlook. But the problem with Kaufman's idea of a free-flowing and aimless dialogue in the most important issues concerning human existence is, that in no other discipline even in the great liberal universities such dialogue will be considered ideal. Even in questions about natural mysteries like why do things fall, why are people killed when lightning strikes, and why does left over food rot, nobody thinks it is enough to let people express their opinions without any recourse to experts

25 Gordon D. Kaufman, "Mystery, Theology, and Conversation", Convocation Address 1991, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 21:2 (1991-92), pp. 12-14

or experiments and records of past scientific discoveries. A dialogue of the confused without any outside help will only compound the confusion. Just as sense experience is threshold for intellectual vision, the limit of intellect opens out to the wisdom of exceptional people like Confucius and Socrates. But as Socrates stated, man's wisdom is to realize that he does not know and that God alone is wise. The integrative vision of sages forms the threshold of divine revelation which enables human beings to see things as God views them.

The vision of dialogue as the coming together of many inadequate and imperfect religions, misses the very meaning of dialogue: Dialogue is between equals, who are confident of their own distinct identities, and who seek only to be present to each other. Scope of interreligious dialogue is to enable each of the religions participating to make clear its specific vision as well as the unique contribution it can make to humanity. Dialogue is the direct consequence of pluralism. Religious pluralism means that each has some unique message to give, and dialogue is the only way to bring it out. Its aim is not at all to produce some "Great Religion, which can never be totally identified with any of its expressions, though all of them are manifestations of it in one way or another"²⁶. Such a Great Religion is not an ideal to be wished for, since it will be a cultural disaster! Thus dialogue and mission are complementary: Dialogue asks each one: "Tell us how God has disclosed himself to you?" Mission says: "This is how God has revealed himself to us, and what he said and did may be relevant also for you".

IV

The Need for a Fresh Approach to Dialogue

From what was said above it appears that interreligious dialogue is in an impossible situation today. By making it a dialogue of people from different religious backgrounds without full confidence in and total identification with their respective traditions it is rendered a matter of private relevance only for those people. Since one cannot bring into the dialogue any special message or

unique claim from one's own religious tradition, what results from exchanges between those persons is the lowest common denominator among those traditions from which they come, a purely humanistic religion at best. So naturally interreligious dialogue is gasping for breath today.

Perhaps the problem is much deeper than it appears on the surface. Here the principal problem is the scope of religion itself, the scheme of salvation for all human beings. In the new perspective it is reduced to a pursuit of the absolute, infinite and immutable Truth. The ultimate goal of human life is said to be attaining a direct contemplation of Infinite Truth face to face. Then all religions are relativized as paths leading up to it, as mere means, each inadequate in itself, or at best intermediary ends. The divine Logos, the Word, is the one absolute in relation to which, Jesus of Nazareth, Buddha and Krishna are all partial reflections and inadequate means. This was the approach of the Greeks, of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. This found its Christian expression in the natural mysticism of Evagrius, who thought of it as the fullest realization of our inherent divinity. But this purely philosophical scheme leaves out the fact that human beings by their resources cannot accomplish this and reach their ultimate goal of a direct contemplation of the divine reality. It has to be seen as a gift of God; God alone can communicate the divine life to human beings. As Aquinas has put it, fire alone can ignite: God alone can divinize.

Besides, it would be anthropomorphic to see human salvation as some kind of after-thought of God, a generous divine response to human sin and its disastrous consequences. It has to be seen as an integral part of the original plan of creation itself, according to which weak human beings are enabled through their own fall and failure to reach back to their first origin and source. This is why, while Buddhism leaves it somewhat in silence, every other major religion postulates a divine intervention to give back to man the divine life originally intended for him. Human salvation is seen as a "divine economy" already present in eternity, just translated into the process of time. According to Hinduism when a person attains the realization: "My self is the Atman", the change takes place not in the divine reality, but only in the finite individual self and the really unreal practical existence.

When the Qur'an is disclosed to Mohammed, the Law is not newly enacted, but the eternal law of God for his creatures is simply revealed. The raising of Christ from the dead is not a course of action forced on God by human beings, but a disclosure in miniature of the whole salvation history of humanity. In brief, religion is not actually man's reaching up to God, by his own efforts grasping the Word of God, but rather the execution and celebration by free and responsible human beings, of God's saving design for all human beings, called to be His children.

What is often forgotten is that for all human beings today there is only one order of salvation. As there is only God for all there cannot be different ideals for attaining that divine reality. This order of salvation of attaining fellowship with the tri-personal Godhead has been available to all human beings at all times and its possibility is present in every genuine religion. Of course all religions are not equal, as some of the perverted religious movements in recent times have amply proved. Even the most developed and authentic religions can get distorted and mixed up with all kinds of erroneous interpretations according to the variety of circumstances and individuals involved. So religions do stand in need of self-criticism and mutual criticism. But as expressions of the divine economy of human salvation each of them has a unique contribution to make. In this sense the approach of Vatican Council II is the best orientation for interreligious dialogue. Its document on Non-Christian Religions picks out four religions and points out each one's unique orientation towards resolving the basic existential problem of man. Interreligious dialogue is not to show the superiority of one religion over the others, nor to make a synthesis of all the religions. Its scope is to bring out the unique, positive contribution of each religion, and show how it actualizes for its followers the one common divine scheme of salvation for all God's children. One meets with another religion, in order to return to one's own historical tradition and re-discover there the dimensions of faith the other religions are emphasizing.

What unites human beings is faith, a gift of God, an inspiration of the divine Spirit dwelling in every human heart. The basic religious community, therefore, should be of all believers, irrespective of their religious affiliation as Hindus, Muslims and

the like. A genuine faith community has to be also a moral community. Jesus told his disciples: If you love me, keep my commandments. Then my Father will give you another Paraclete, the Spirit. I and my Father will come to you and make our abode with you (See Jn. 14:15-17,20). Faith community is a fellowship of love and of moral living in the experience of the indwelling Spirit. Religions are not substitutes for faith, nor as Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued, reifications of faith, leading to "cumulative traditions", a far cry from the genuine, original, personal faith! It is also incorrect to say that religions "in their specificity manifest different faces of that supreme Mystery which is never exhausted. In their diversity, they enable us to experience the richness of the One more profoundly"²⁷. This would mean that religions are only partial expressions of faith. In fact, faith finds expression in religion. Without religion, faith will remain purely abstract and theoretical. Individual religions show the actual realization of faith in the coordinates of human existence in history and in society.

The function of incarnating the God-given faith in the diverse coordinates of human existence explains also the natural diversity of religions. Human beings find their existence bound up with different factors like history, economics, society, individual psychology, and metaphysical transcendence, which form coordinates maintaining life in position. Though faith and religion have to take all these into consideration, each religion may find its specific focus in one or other of these and from there take care of the other coordinates. For the Judeo-Christian tradition history is the principal focus. Creation itself is viewed as the first instalment of a God-man covenant producing its human partner, and the great deeds of God in human history empower human beings to return consciously and deliberately to their Creator through their own proper activities. For Christians, the entry of the Son of God into human history through his incarnation, death and resurrection is the definitive event through which the return of the human beings to the Father is effectively made possible. For Buddhism the psychology of human suffering and the complexity of society form the specific coordinate that defines and concretely expresses faith. Buddha's illumination concerning the emptiness

²⁷ *Religious Pluralism* p. 347, no. 32

of the phenomenal world, His eightfold path explaining the way to break out of the present state of bondage, and the samgha, the hierarchy of stages through which individuals have to pass to attain final liberation, provide the definite physiognomy of Buddhist religion. The Hindu ideal of liberation through *atmasakṣatkāra* or Self-realization finds its focus in metaphysical transcendence, discerning the eternal in the temporal abandoning all attachment to the perishable goods, practising the virtues of self-discipline and intensely desiring freedom from worldly existence.

One cannot say that these are only partial realizations of faith, or that one particular mode of expressing faith by itself is superior to another. What is important is that finding full expression of faith in one coordinate, the other coordinates also are taken care of²⁸. This means one has to follow certain criteria to do justice to a specific religious tradition, whether it is one's own or another religion one is dealing with. First comes the cohesiveness of its doctrines and symbols and other factors. Their actual expression in worship forms with the ancient adage "law of faith, law of prayer" is the second criterion. Thirdly one has to see how the particular religion translates its faith into practice in facing actual problems. How a particular tradition relates itself to other religions and traditions is a fourth criterion. Finally how a religion challenges others through its own positive contribution is an important criterion for its authenticity. Similarly, one cannot pick up a particular concept of a religion and compare it to a similar concept in another tradition. Any religious idea or practice should be examined in the context of the total world vision of the tradition. Besides, no religious idea appears in isolation, but rather in a cluster with its presuppositions and consequences. One has to see the specific religious meaning of the concept, and its place in the particular doctrine or practice or moral prescription of which it is a part. Finally the religious meaning and function of the concept with regard to the religion or tradition as a whole should be the ultimate criterion in comparing it to a similar concept in another tradition.

28 See Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1985

What becomes clear is that in defining the relationship of religions in dialogue the traditional alternatives of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism are all inadequate since they over-emphasize one particular aspect of religions to the total neglect of others. Since all religions are based in the common faith shared by all human beings led by the indwelling Spirit of God all exclusivist claims are sheer arrogance. Inclusivism incurs the blame of condescension towards others when one claims that one's religion includes others. Pluralism also is defective since if religions are parallel paths, totally independent of each other, dialogue cannot lead to any real understanding, but can only end up with the least common denominator. The only meaningful context of interreligious dialogue is an understanding of the salvific will of God for all his children, and the one economy of salvation in which all religions find their place. But dialogue cannot take oneself or others for granted. Adult dialogue is a critical presence to one's own religious tradition constantly examining whether one has properly understood the tradition and whether errors and deviations have entered it in the course of history. It has to be also a critical presence to the other partners in dialogue and their traditions challenging them to greater authenticity and fidelity to all the coordinates of faith in the present historical, social and cultural context.

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Religious Experience in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures

Religious experience is not something easily explained. It involves an interaction between God and the human person. To come to some understanding of this interaction demands our being able to identify and describe both parties in this relationship. Thus, self awareness and honesty are important ingredients in this process. And what about God? God, our partner in faith, is indescribable at best and wholly mysterious. Hence, any attempt at expressing a perception of Him is limited by the finiteness of human experience and expression. Theologians, artists, poets, mystics – people of all kinds and walks of life perceive Him differently, try to express their insights, yet never capture the whole. And it is important to recognize this limitation, for it keeps us humble in our appreciation of the work of the Scriptural authors and more importantly keeps us focused in our expectations of them.

Since the mystery is so vast, why attempt any description? Because we are human and need to voice our beliefs in ways that are understandable to ourselves. And so we attempt to articulate our experience of the divine in language and images that, hopefully, will communicate that experience. Is this experience personal? yes! Each individual is a unique partner in that relationship between God and the human. But is it expressible to others? yes! Because there is much human experience that we share as a race. My experiences can and do relate to you and yours to me. Thus the avenue for sharing religious experience is open. It is limited only by our ability to communicate. Nevertheless, it is possible to share such an experience to some degree.

All of this is by way of introduction to the entire Biblical phenomenon. The "Bible" is a collection of religious experience written by groups and individuals over centuries of experience

and reflection. But the experiences related, though distanced by time and language and concepts, can still be potent and applicable to us.

In my mind, there are several basic factors in approaching the overall religious experience found in the "Bible". These areas of experience are important for each one of us to come to some understanding of our relationship with the God whom we have come to know through this tradition. And in these areas, our experiences come to understandability.

My first observation is that the expressions of religious experience in the Bible are not static. This is because religious experience is a relationship that grows as its participants grow. God is always the same, but we are not. Nor is our ability to perceive and understand the static. Hence our experience changes and our expressions of it change as well. As human beings have the chance to experience God, they see Him in the ways they can accept and explain. And upon reflection and development, understanding grows. This is a view expressed by Paul: "When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child; when I became man, I put aside childish things" (1 Corinthians 13: 11). All human experiences of the divine then change with time, reflection and maturity.

In the Bible, God is initially perceived as a "tribal deity", an experience common in its day. Abram's experiences of a call (Genesis 12:1-9) and of participation in a formal relationship (Gen. 17:1-8) are both examples of how he perceived the relationship with the divine. For him it was a "family" relationship with a God uniquely related to this one group. But the family grew and new levels of understanding developed in the experiences of Jacob (cf. his dream in Gen. 28:10-15) and the truly foundational experiences of Moses which begin with the encounter at the burning bush (Exodus 3:4-22). In these instances, the individual encountered God and sought to explain that encounter in terms of a frame of reference, this "family". But notice how through the expansion of the human relational frame, the understanding of God grows as well.

More formal expressions of the relationship are made in terms of "covenant". This quasi-legal terminology sought to express this relationship as more than whim or fancy. Rather a trust

is expressed in the permanent presence of God in his relationship with a people and so is expressed in terms which people found understandable as well as comforting and secure. The covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:1-8) begins this process of expression. It finds its culmination in the Sinai Covenant, narrated in Exodus and spelled out over centuries of experience in the remaining books of the Pentateuch. But be aware that these books are made up of many layers of human interpretation of the divine will as can be seen in the many "codes" included in the works.

By no means did Israel cease its attempt to express the secure and formal relationship of God and humanity with the covenant of Moses. Covenant renewal ceremonies pervade the story of Israel. In Joshua 24:16-28, Israel in the promised land renews its commitment to God. II Kings 22-23 relates the finding of the "law" and speaks of a religious renewal. And even in post-exilic times the reaffirmation of this formal statement of relationship with God is essential for the people, though most certainly now focused on law (Nehemiah 8:10).

Other "covenants" are spoken about indicating this as a most acceptable way to describe the relationship between humanity and God. In 2 Samuel 7, a formal "covenant" is established with David and his heirs expressing the interconnectedness of the human institution of ruler with the Divine experience in which God himself is recognized as the true Ruler.

The covenant defined the people as those who knew this God and expressed their profound faith in God's constant presence to them. Yet within this covenant framework Israel continued to grow in its understanding of how 'their' God interacts with them and humanity and continued in its attempt at expressing this relationship. In the time of Elijah, monotheism was not the normative expression of understanding of the divine. But *monolatry* was! For Elijah and Elisha, there was no espousal of the notion of only one God. Rather they insisted that Israel was to worship only this God (1 Kings 18). It isn't until further reflection that Israel comes to see the truth of the single Godhead (Isaiah 43:9-17). And it is further reflection which allows Israel to come to terms with the one God as the universal God who has relations not just with this one family, but with the entire family of

humankind (cf. Isaiah 45:1 and its depiction of Cyrus as God's agent; Ps 47).

The biblical process of understanding the relationship with God continues into the New Testament as well. The language of covenant is immediately used to express the new relationship through Jesus (cf Mk 14:24 and parallels). And something new is added to the reflection, for here the experience of the Triune God, the mystery of the Trinity comes to the fore. The specificity of God's speaking through the ministry of Jesus, the expression of a new covenant (cf. Jer 31:31-34) and the recognition of his Triune self-revelation are all a new step in the process.

The religious experience of the Bible thus *grows*. It changes as the human understanding of what has been experienced changes. And God uses this human growth to allow us to develop in our understanding of Him, of our relationship with him and of our expression of this experience.

Within this process of growing understanding of our experience with God found in the Bible, there are several basic perceptions about God which seem present at most stages of the development. The first of these can be called: *God is not us*.

From the very beginning of the Biblical accounts, though God is "anthropomorphized", i. e., described in human terms, there is still the recognition that He is not really like us. Unlike the accounts preserved in the Greco-Roman world and other Ancient Near Eastern or Oriental traditions, the Judeo-Christian God always is seen as different. Though there are hints of his anger and jealousy - very human emotions - yet there is more. From the first, he is called the Creator. And whether this is pictured in the mythic language of Genesis 1:1-2,4 or in the evocative poetry of the psalms or the prophets, creation is a fundamental attribute of this God (Ps 104). And as Creator, he is not like creation! He is a God of wonders in control of the physical world (cf Ex.7:1-11,10 and Pss 78. 105). But most extraordinarily this wonder turns to awe before a God wholly other (cf Isaiah 6:1-13).

So much is this otherness a part of the tradition that in the post-exilic writers, the very name of God is never uttered (cf Nehemiah's injunctions), a practice continued among pious Jews today. The New Testament also expresses this otherness in the

accounts of the transfiguration (Mk 9:2-10; Mt 17:1-13; Lk 9:28-36), in the description of Jesus and his ministry in the seven "signs" of John's Gospel, and even in the changes evidenced in the later Pastoral Epistles.

Thus one Biblical experience of God is of one who is separated and other. But there is another side to this experience. For the Bible is explicit in its experience of a God who is closely involved with us, hence: *The Personal God*.

This nearness and intimacy with God comes across at every turn in the Biblical works. From a God who offers his name to Moses (Ex 3:13-15) to the experience of face-to-face encounters between Moses and YHWH (Ex 33:7-23; 34:29-35). The hauntingly provocative yet simple expressions of a God personally involved in the trials and joys of daily life are found in the psalms (cf Pss 54; 56; 57; 62; 71 and many more). And who can forget Isaiah's image of God as a mother who holds her child (Isa 49:14-15) or the Song of Songs' depiction of God as a lover! Such intimate expressions can only arise out of a similarly intimate experience of a God who is closely involved with the individual and the people as a whole.

This experience of the Creator and saving God who is *my* savior (cf Ps 3), comes to fruition in the NT experience of Jesus. There are many expressions of Jesus' teaching (cf Mt 6:25-34) and his encounter with individuals (cf Lk 5:21ff; John 9) which indicate this profound sense of God's intimate involvement.

Thus, the God of the bible is seen at one and the same time as one who is wholly other and yet firmly and irrevocably linked to humanity and to each human person. And it is this dual perception which forms the basis of the religious experiences expressed.

There is yet another universal understanding that is inherent in the religious experience of the Bible and that is that God, awesome and intimate is always: *The God who saves*.

Undoubtedly, it was Israel's reflection on the experience of the Exodus which opened their eyes to see God as Savior (cf Nehemiah 9:6-37). The wonders of the rescue from Egypt (Ex 7-11; 14-15); the marvelous creation of the people, formed in the crucible of the desert wanderings and by the law at Sinai/Horeb

(Ex 19ff) and even the entrance into the land (Joshua 1) express the understanding of God as Savior.

This experience allowed Israel to reinterpret *all* its encounters with the divine as saving acts. Creation itself, aided by the mythic form of the accounts, is seen as a saving act (cf Ps 19). The call and experience of the Patriarchs are part of God's saving plan (cf Gen 12 ff). In the Deuteronomistic History, the judges and prophets of Israel were all instruments by which God was able to "save his people". Thus salvation is a work of God.

But this "saving action" of God goes beyond the political and primordial acts. God as savior was so pervasive an experience that all of Israel's life was seen in these terms. The Law was an instrument of salvation (Ps. 19:8-15) for it was the foundation of the people and gave life (Dt 30:15-20; Joshua 24). And from this Israel began to see the saving God's actions as faithful, even though the people fell away and sinned. In fact the notion of sin and forgiveness derived from this experience of the saving God who is always faithful. To Him, the sinner could always return. Sin as evidenced in sickness and death (Pss 3;6), whether personal or communal (cf Ezekiel 14:12-23) was always met with an expectation of forgiveness and hence salvation from the wages of sin. In fact early on God's punishment for unfaithfulness was seen not as an act by God, but a cessation of saving action. He did not so much intend evil, but allowed his people to experience the evil they sought through their sins (cf Judges 2:6-3,6). But even if the people were to fall into evil by their sins, they could still turn to God and they expected him to do again his saving work. All his actions were salvific. Even the experience of the exile led Israel to understand that it was a result of *their* unfaithfulness. But in returning to God there was the hope of return from the exile expressed time and again as a saving act of God (cf. Isaiah 42:10-16; 43:1-44,5; Jeremiah 32:1-15).

The God of Israel's experience was no capricious God who acted evilly toward his people. He was always a God who allowed his people freedom to interact with him. But when they chose not to do so, they had to take up the responsibility for their actions. When they turned to him again, they always found the God who forgave and saved. Thus every action of his was seen as salvific.

This goes a long way to explain how the cross of Jesus was understood as well. For Jesus' death was seen as the result of mankind's sinfulness and as God's response. In the Resurrection, the experience of the God who saves comes full force to human consciousness. The Isaian prophecies already provided the background for such an understanding (Isa. 52:13-53:12) which comes to bloom in Paul's explanation of God's saving work (cf Romans 8:28-39) and the evangelists' attempts at interpreting the event (Mk 14-16; Mt 26-28; Lk 23-24; Jn 13-17; 18-20).

This avenue of the perception of God as always the savior carries through into the ultimate human experience of death. For here also the act of God is one of saving. From the view of Sheol as the ultimate sickness (Ps 23:4; 30:3-6) to the cries of the prophets like Isaiah 25:7-8 and Hosea 13:9-14, death is overcome in the act of God. And here the ultimate cry of faith in God who saves comes from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:54-57:

And when this which is corruptible clothes itself in incorruptibility and this which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then the word that is written shall come about:

Death is swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Religious experience is an awareness of a relationship. As such, it requires insight and reflection on the nature of the parties involved. Here again we need to admit our need for individual and communal self-introspection and honesty. At the same time we need to be perceptive and open to learn more about our partner in faith.

To help solidify and articulate our insights into God, we use the Biblical expressions of that faith experience. The God revealed there is one whom we must learn to know. And this learning is a process. Individually, our insights will change and grow as we do. Communally, our shared experiences, though founded on accepted past insights expressed in dogmatic teaching, also continue to expand as we as a Church do.

While we grow and mature, the Biblical accounts give us some sure foundations. For in those religious experiences God's basic nature is revealed. He is a God, awesome and wonderful, creator and always faithful, unlike us in so many ways. Yet, He is no distant and removed deity but a God personally involved in our lives. He is a God who continually expresses His desire for a relationship. Covenant is the expression of His seemingly irrevocable commitment to us. And perhaps most importantly, He is a God who always saves. His every action, from creation to the resurrection of Jesus, from allowing us to reap the folly of our sinfulness to forgiving us our sins, is an act of salvation ! The fundamental experience of God is salvific !

The Biblical accounts thus serve as the foundation from which we as individuals and Church can express our experience. But they also provide a framework within which our understanding of God and self can continue to grow. Awesome, intimate, never totally known and always saving – these are the hallmarks of God in the religious experiences of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures.

Gerard F. Rafferty

Atmasaksatkara and the Experiential Approach to Ethics

The Hindu Contribution to Religion

If we look at the content of religious experience it may not be very much different in the Hindu tradition from that of any other. The "I am who am" of the Bible adequately indicates the transcendental reality of the Divine. From our world of practical experience God has to be seen as "the wholly Other", the awesome and at the same time fascinating Presence man constantly encounters in his life. The unique character of the Hindu religious experience is in its special method of approach to the divine reality, and the way it elaborates that experience in the ordering of human life. The Hindu tradition, owing to the historical and cultural situation in which its sages reflected on the ultimate meaning of human life, emphasized the immanence of the Divine in all things the starting point, instead of the divine transcendence from which others began.

I. One Alone without a second

The ṛṣis who dwelt in the jungles, concentrated their attention on the phenomenon of consciousness, particularly that of suffering. Looking for the roots of human suffering coming from the outside world, from supernal beings and one's own psyche, they saw the contrast between one's own self and the non-self or the object-world out there. They realized that the really Real had to be in the direction of the subject. It had to be the One-without-a-second, the pure, infinite and immutable consciousness, without anything additional to it or competing with it, the one Self of all things. The experience of the Ṛṣis presented the whole universe surrounding them as an enveloping maternal womb. The movement was from the One to the many, as sparks from

the fire, rays from the sun. RgVeda, the earliest document of Hinduism, presents the One as Prajāpati, Creator and Father of all things (RV X, 121; I, 52, 14), the support of all the worlds (RV I, 154, 4) and the one Light that illumines all (RV VIII, 58; Kath. Up. V, 15). So God cannot be seen as an object out there, since he is not one among the many objects. Nor can he be experienced indirectly as a cause from its effects, because God's effects never equal him nor adequately represent him. So God is perceived in a non-indirect way as one sees one's own self. The divine reality is referred to as "That One from which the origin, sustenance and dissolution of all things." RgVeda even says that since the creatures do not add any thing to the Creator, the many only manifest the One. "To the One sages give many names." (RV I, 164, 46; X, 114, 5)

The sages present the divine reality very much like a maternal principle, the womb that envelops the fetus. This may be the reason why the concept of a Mother Goddess came to be an important aspect of the Hindu religious experience. Aditi, the infinite was the active principle of creation in the RgVeda and Dakṣa, the male principle had only a supportive role. Later there arose the apparently insoluble metaphysical problem, how the Infinite Brahman could produce real beings without compromising its changelessness. The Hindu answer to the problem was to postulate a female principle by the side of the Infinite, identical with it in reality, but in some manner distinct from it. It was only an infinitesimal part of this female principle, the Mahāmāya, that was projected as creation. So we see Lakṣmī as the consort of Viṣṇu and Pārvatī by the side of Śiva and the like.

On the other hand, the personal element of encounter with the divine was also very prominent already in the original experience of Hinduism. The Creator was conceived as a cosmic Person from whose body the whole creation came forth: From his mouth came the Brahmins, the priestly class which ministered to the Word, from his arms the fighting and ruling class, from his thighs the business class of Vaiśyas and from his feet the working class. This encounter with the divine Person may be said to be the essence of religious experience in the Bhagavad Gīta. There Śrī Kṛṣṇa an incarnation of the supreme God Viṣṇu, appears first as a preceptor to advise Arjuna who is hesitating about his duty of fighting

in the righteous war against the Kauravās. Then he shows himself as the ideal of all human activity in his detached divine role of creator and preserver of all things. Finally he reveals himself to Arjuna as the cosmic Person, containing in himself all beings, and hence the object of devotion. The divine Person is the ultimate focal point in which all man's dissipated powers have to be gathered together in total surrender.

Renunciation

Denial of anything real outside of or additional to the Infinite reality of God made renunciation one of the basic notes of Hindu religious experience. Renunciation is in no way a world-negation. It may be said to be otherworldliness or even worldlessness. It only means that anything other than God cannot have any lasting value. One of the Upaniṣads puts it clearly when it says: Anything that moves in this world is filled with God. So do not grab anything. By renouncing it you will enjoy it. For whose is all wealth? (Is. Up. 1) The Hindu religious experience does not look for a resolution of the tension between the negative and the positive approaches to God. On the one hand one has to say regarding everything falling in our experience "Not so, not so". Nothing finite can represent the incomprehensible Infinite. On the other hand everything points towards the really Real. It is like pointing out a particular star by excluding every other star in its neighbourhood. When every other star is excluded the one left will appear as the star one is looking for. Similarly the divine Reality has to reveal itself. All human effort is to remove the obstacles standing in its way. There is neither easy transition nor continuity between the negative effort and the positive realization of the One-without-a-second: That Light by whose light every other shining thing shines cannot be illumined by anything else, but has to be perceived in its own light. One does not strike a match to find the Sun!

Renunciation is a core element of Hindu religious experience. Not that Hinduism cannot exist without those who renounce. But without them it would remain singularly impoverished. It does not follow the teleological method of using every particular thing as a means towards the attainment of the end, a rung in the ladder leading up to heaven, or as a symbolic presence here and now of the Absolute. Since it starts with the supposition of the

presence of the Absolute as the ground of one's being, more intimate than one's own interior, the question is not how much one can acquire in order to gain and augment one's happiness. Rather the question is how much one can do without, how much of the purely peripheral and superficial trappings one can shed, and how far one can pull down the walls surrounding the inner consciousness, so that the inner light may shine out without being filtered through the intervening sheathes of existence.

So the Hindu religious experience moves in two directions. First and foremost it is profoundly interiorized. Confidence in the inner Self as the really Real in the midst of one's individuality and the outer world which have only a relative and practical reality, is the reason for one's hope of final liberation from the present existence of ignorance and suffering. On the other hand it is also extrovert with abundant mythology and congregational practices. This external expression of religious experience is rather secondary and very much conditioned by the cultural circumstances. Thus ritual as such lost its importance after the Vedic period. The expensive Vedic sacrifices were beyond the means of ordinary people. So the ascetics who betook themselves to the jungles substituted symbols for them and transformed them into meditative exercises. Since the essential part of the Vedic sacrifices were the ritual utterances by the priests the Word or mantra became the focus of meditation. The mantra is a sacred formula repeated indefinitely. It may be composed of a single syllable like OM or may consist of a hundred or more syllables. Sometimes the syllables themselves may not have any special meaning, since mantra itself is a tribute to the Word as form. Some times the mantra consists of simple mention of the divine name such as "Ram(a)", which repeated indefinitely helps to gather back one's dissipated mental powers and focus them on the Word.

Another aspect of the same is the development of the temple cult of the idol which was unknown in ancient times. It began when the wandering Aryans settled down and established villages and towns. The method of founding a village was to build a temple in the midst of the designated geographical spot. The global shape of the temple was symbolic of the cosmos, and indicated a reconquest of space from inimical powers and its resacralization. The temple itself was the object of worship and it was never thought of as a place of gathering. With the development

of monumental iconography attention shifted to the particular deity who was represented by the image and was invoked in the consecration of the temple to come and dwell in the midst of the people. One or other particular aspect of the supreme Deity, Viṣṇu, Śiva and the like, or a particular mystery is treated as a guest. The worship or puja is rendering to the Deity what one would do to a distinguished guest, bathing, anointing, decorating with flowers, feeding and taking him in procession. This was also an extension of the household hearth of olden days. Each family had a deity venerated in an inner sanctum of the house, and the householder and his wife venerated it and held it as the focus of their daily life and practice.

Obviously these various elements of cult and temple worship have only a secondary importance in the Hindu tradition, and can sometimes even appear as rather distracting. They only express and celebrate one's inner experience of the deity, and are expected, in their turn, to lead to a deeper realization of the inner Atman. So a multiplicity of gods or even religions and different worship forms and rituals do not constitute a serious problem to the Hindu understanding of religious experience. This diversity and multiplicity in no way denies the unity based in the unity of the One-without-a-second dwelling in one's heart. Variety of forms of expression only shows that none of them can adequately comprehend the incomprehensible. So the more of them, the better !

II. The Experiential Approach to Ethics

The specific Hindu approach to morality follows its type of religious experience. Its two poles are ṛta and dharma, rta showing the orientation to interiority and dharma the movement to the outside. The basic principle of all morality is ṛtam, which may be translated as right or righteousness. Cognate with the Lat. rectus, from which right and straight are derived, its principal meaning is "right" as opposed to what is wrong. But since ṛtam is derived from the Sanskrit root ṛ=to move, to flow, it also indicates the dynamic original principle of all things, the primeval energy. It is the truth of truths and the centre of centres, the basic principle of the cosmos. It is not a cosmic power, nor an impersonal order of values as good and beautiful. As pure consciousness it is the rational ordaining of all things, including merit and demerit, reward and punishment. Perception of that

ultimate truth is through faith (śraddha). A statement of the RgVeda, often repeated in the later tradition explains the central role of ṛtam: "Like the Sun in the sky, Wind in the atmosphere, the priest at the altar, the guest in the house, ṛtam abides in man, in broad space, in the sky, in the cosmic order, in water, in cattle and in the rock (RV 4.40.5; V.S. 10.24;12.14; TS. 3.2. 10.1; Sat. Br. 6.7.3.11; Kath. Up. 5.2). The particular gods like Indra, Varuna and Viṣṇu are all shown to be children of rta and also its protectors. What is universally true is ṛtam and its opposite, the false, is termed "anṛtam".

The divine order is designated as *vrataṃ* which means vow. Vratam marks the transition from the microcosm of the human self with its center in the inner Atman to the macrocosm of social life. Here morality takes the form of dharma. Dharma literally means "support", and it is what supports and maintains the social life of man. As the Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad explains, when the divine Self undertook the work of creation and produced the four classes of men, it was still dissatisfied owing to lack of unity and harmony among the classes. So the Creator produced dharma as a god and also as the highest form of emergent perfection, higher than all classes. "There is nothing higher than dharma. A weak man controls a strong man by dharma, just as if by a king. Dharma is truth. So one who speaks truth is said to speak dharma." (Bṛh. Up. I, iv,14). Here the Upaniṣad is repeating the original thought of RgVeda that dharma is the manifestation in the external world of the one divine Reality. In fact it quotes a verse from the Veda: "From whom the sun rises, and in whom it sets, him the gods made dharma. He only is today and tomorrow will be." (RgVeda X, 121. 6; Bṛh. Up. I, v, 23).

Morality is to pursue in life the divine qualities. These are enumerated as honesty, straightforwardness, fellow-feeling, charity, non-violence, truthfulness, modesty, agreeable speech, chastity, religious conviction and purity of heart. In following the moral ideal one is not having in mind a specific orientation to a particular goal as the Greeks had in view. The ideal is to be true to oneself. So the emphasis is on maintaining one's authenticity and on following the straight path. All immorality is crookedness! So the demons who pursued pleasure and power are credited with all the bad qualities like bad intention, swearing, falsehood, gambling, egoism, cruelty, adultery and theft.

Morality has its proper place in a social world, but the social world itself is a projection of the inner world of man. As man consists of body, mind, intellect and soul, four stages in one's life are detailed as brahmaçarya or studenthood when one grows, gr̥hastāśrama or the stage of a householder, vānaprastha, the stage of the ascetic who retires into the jungle, and the sannyasin, the liberated, who has attained freedom from all worldly cares. Moral rules are different for the members of the family at these different stages. Society itself is seen as an extension of the family, with four sections of its own: The Śūdra, whose main service is work, marks the stage of the body, the Vaiśya, the business man represents the mind, Kṣatriya, the ruler stands for the intellect and the Brahmin, the teacher and priest has the role of the liberated spirit. Here again moral obligations have to be different for these different classes. But the crucial principle of morality is *svadharma*, one's personal duty. One cannot leave one's own duty pertaining to one's own specific class and particular stage in life for the duties of another, even that of a Brahmin, even though these may appear more noble in themselves.

The three paths

Thus the Hindu vision of morality following the experiential approach defines itself into three margas or paths, of karma, bhakti and jñāna; of action, devotion and realization. Action finds its place in the periphery of human existence, organizing the outside world to correspond to the purity and clarity of one's inner Self. Action is not a means for attaining an absent goal, but rather an effort to translate one's inner consciousness to the unconscious layers of existence and to make a truly human world. Hence the most ideal action is ritual sacrifice in which the material things of leaf, flower, water and the like are transformed into their symbolic meaning. Bhakti or devotion brings all one's powers and possessions to surrender themselves to the divine and in that way share (*bhaj*) in the divine glory. But the end and goal of all morality is jñāna or realization. Since the ultimate Good is already present, what one has to do is to realize that there is only one really Real, the divine Self. Corresponding to these paths are also the goals of life termed as puruṣārthas. They are artha, mastering the world through the production of wealth, kāma or

personal pleasure by turning wealth into its proper human use, and dharma, righteous ordering of all things according to duty. To these three are added a final and fourth one which is called mokṣa or liberation. It is not actually an escape from the world, a world negation. It is rather an escape with the world, showing that the world has a higher meaning as a manifestation of the Spirit.

Conclusion

So we can say that Hinduism follows a single principle in the elaboration of its religious system: It is an effort to experience the Atman as the really Real, the One-without-a-second and to translate that experience into the various details of one's life. Atman is the inner Self and ground of one's being and there cannot be anything really additional to it. All religion is to translate the one experience into the layers of the human microcosm, body, mind, intellect and soul. This inner world is extended into the four stages of one's life, and the four classes of human society. Moral rules, ritual and worship have only a subordinate role, conditioned by situation and culture to make the outer world correspond to one's inner Self.

Anand Mohan

The Buddhist Vision of Religion as Dhamma

Siddhartha Gautama, the sage of the Sakya clan, created a world revolution in religion through his illumination under the Bodhi tree, emerging from there as Buddha. The meaning of human life was traditionally stated as the fourfold goal of wealth, pleasure, righteousness and liberation. At the time of Buddha the first three goals were judged to be relatively unimportant for religion, and the whole religious discussion focussed on the ideal of final liberation from the present existence of ignorance and suffering. Buddha made history by setting the Dharma wheel turning through his moral teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

The three jewels

Besides the *Dhamma* there are two other factors, the figure of Buddha as the ideal of enlightenment, and the *samgha* or the order of stages leading to buddhahood: these together are called the three jewels of Buddhism. Buddhism started with a very minute analysis of the human Self, which was the main focus of Hinduism. If the principal concern of Hinduism was the metaphysical reality of the Atman, the self, affirmed as One-without-a-second, the leading idea of the Buddhist analysis was a moral one. The old vision of the self was that of something eternal and immutable caught in a web of good and bad, purity and defilement, auspicious and inauspicious, and the goal was to attain a state of pure quiescence. Buddha's insight cut this Gordian knot at one stroke: He said that there is no immutable and eternal self to be liberated. The so called self consisted of a collection of ever changing elements, of a flow of them without any stable factor at all. Buddha is a non-essential notion, pure buddhahood or illumination. The notion of the *Puruṣa* in Samkhya philosophy had pointed in the same direction: Over against *Prakṛti*, the three-colored goddesses that embraced all the essential properties of reflection, action and limitation, *Puruṣa* was a non-essential notion, a pure witness.

Similarly the *samgha* is not a community, nor a fellowship, but the hierarchy of stages through which one has to pass to attain finally the position of the enlightened one. The ultimate stage is that of Buddha who has attained *mahaparinirvana* and is completely beyond birth and rebirth. The penultimate stage is represented by the *arahant* or saint who has attained liberation in this life, and is totally different from ordinary people and is not often understood by them. What happens to the *arahant* when he dies cannot be expressed in ideas and analogies drawn from the present experience. Buddhist philosophy is not, however, nihilism. It only says that all human conceptions derived from material things do not exhaust all reality. All metaphysical questions derived from the experience of the world, like those of a supreme Being, existence and immortality of the soul and eternity of the world are *avyakrtavastuni*, irrelevant queries. Since they do not pertain to our present experience, they do not lead to any meaningful answer. The only relevant question is how one can get out of the straight jacket of the present human psychology produced by ignorance, attachment, sense experience, desire, pain and pleasure, and the phenomena of sickness, old age and death.

Dhamma is nothing but the way of living. To be diligent is dhamma, to respect parents and teachers is dhamma, not to hurt other people is dhamma. Can a person who does evil be happy? Can a thief, a murderer or a lazy man be happy? Certainly not. This is because moral law is the law of life. Every one has to practise dhamma. True happiness depends on the dhamma and not on anything else. Abstain from killing, stealing, telling lies, from sexual misconduct, and from ingesting intoxicating drinks. These five precepts are the minimum standard of moral practice. Without these there cannot be peace in society.

Religion is, therefore, dhamma, the moral process of getting out of the enslaving worldly experience. It is an understanding of the laws, including both physical and moral causation that governs the emergence and continuation of the present situation. The flow of evanescent elements is not an haphazard process. Every element, although appearing and disappearing at a particular moment, has a relationship with every other moment and follow the law of dependent origination. The laws of moral causation, of action and retribution are governed by objective laws. Dhamma is Buddha's insight into this basic interdependence.

The four noble truths

The basic interdependence of the enslaving factors of human existence is stated in the Four Noble Truths and the Middle Path proclaimed by Buddha in his first sermon at the Deer Park near Benares, inaugurating his ministry. The four noble truths are those of suffering, origin of suffering, prevention of the origination of desire and the path leading to the extinction of suffering.

The noble truth of *dukkha* or suffering proclaims that suffering is not anything accidental to the present condition of man. It is essential and intrinsic to the psychological make up of the situation. So it cannot be removed by patchwork measures. The phenomenon of birth, sickness, old age and death, and the experience of pain and pleasure belong to the very basic framework of ignorance, passion, sense contact, desire and frustration. The Buddhist approach to evil is to recognize it as a fact, without seeking a reason for it in the designs of a creator or explaining it away as a mere negation or absence. In the whole Indian tradition evil was conceived positively inherent to the structure of finite being, endemic to dependent origination. There are both good and evil in the world which have to be dealt with in their root causes.

The noble truth of *samudaya* or the reason for suffering declares that the root of evil and suffering is in the psychology of man, especially desire. The components of the mind have a fourfold grouping, feeling (*vedana*), sense impressions, images and concepts (*sanna*), conative activities and their concomitants (*sankhara*) and intellectual activity (*vinna*). Though there is no permanent soul, still there is continuity from life to life through the emotionally charged experiences and their memories registered in the unconscious mind. These outlast the body and determine the state of re-becoming in rebirth. The impressions of pleasant and unpleasant are the result of sense contact or the conceptual activity of the mind, imagining, remembering, and from them result *vinna* which includes both knowledge and belief. *Sankhara* is a comprehensive term including volitions conditioned by true or false beliefs, the conative or purposive activities and also all those factors which accompany conscious volitional activity. The latent tendencies of desire to satisfy our senses, egoistic impulses, aggression, conceit, ignorance, doubt and the like remain in the unconscious and maintain suffering.

The third noble truth of *nirodha* or prevention of desire deals with the therapeutic process by which the mind is divested of its strivings and enabled to achieve the destruction of its desires. It declares the goal of Buddhist endeavour. Religion is a human phenomenon that should deal primarily with human bondage. The goal of Buddhist religious endeavour is to see that ignorance is completely destroyed through true knowledge and that craving or selfish desire is eradicated and replaced by the right attitude of love and wisdom. This state is Nirvana, the state of perfect peace characterised by the absence of defilements and freedom from suffering. Nirvanic state of consciousness is distinguished from the normal consciousness (*sanna-sanni*) of the average person, the abnormal consciousness (*visannasanni*) of the insane or neurotic, and the developed consciousness (*vibhata-sanni*) of cultivated person or mystic. It is attained with the cessation of all conditioned forms of ideation.

The eightfold path

The fourth noble truth proposed by Buddha is *magga* or the path to liberation. Here the method is not propitiating the powers that are through supplication and sacrifice, and attaining transcendence, looking at existence and life as it were from above. It is rather a method of inward orientation and self-analysis about one's craving and grasping or clinging. The main goal is attainment of long-range happiness by eliminating future suffering by putting an end to the vicious cycle of death and rebirth. This can be achieved only through renunciation (*nekkhamma*). But the repression of desires is not the proper method. For repressed craving will only go into the unconscious and from there influence one's behaviour. So the appropriate method is a process of understanding and gradual self orientation.

The first two *margas* focus attention on understanding. As Buddha says: "A monk lives contemplating body in the body, . . . feeling in the feelings, consciousness in the consciousness, and finally mental objects in the mental objects" (*Samyutta Nikaya*, 5.9). When one understands each element in one's existence, body feeling, consciousness and mental objects as they actually are the danger of identifying oneself with them is removed. So right understanding or view of things is the first *marga*. But liberation from craving, identification with material objects of

pleasure and long held attitudes and habits cannot be done away with all on a sudden. They are orientations consciously undertaken at one time or another. So there is need of a conscious reorientation, which requires right thinking. So right thinking is the second path.

The ethical system

As in other ethical systems, in Buddhism also the goal of moral living is happiness. But this happiness does not consist in pleasure or in enjoyment of objects how noble so ever they be. Because those objects will not eliminate dependence nor secure freedom. This freedom has to be realized slowly in the social context where the dependence on things and situations were first contracted. Here the first stage is to attain the right value judgments in daily existence. In the famous *Atthaka-vagga* of the *Sutta-nipata* Buddha maintained that statements about good and bad are very subjective. Equally relative are claims about true (*sacca*) and false (*musā*), depending on one's likes and dislikes. So truth values are not distinguishable from moral values. The world, for Buddha, consists not only of mountains and rivers, trees and stones, but also of men and animals and behavioral patterns. So the correcting of one's attitudes demands first of all going beyond this subjective relativism about truth and the conflict between truth and moral value. This is achieved through the path of right speech, by which the sage places himself beyond all conflicts regarding what is true and false, and good and bad.

Speech has to be supported by action, and hence the fourth path is right action. Right action is *kusala* or healthy as opposed to *akusala* or unhealthy. Whether an action is right and wholesome or not is decided not by its object, but by asking whether the action leads to greater detachment and freedom or to greater bondage. According to Buddha there are four types of people in the world, one who torments oneself (*attantapa*) like the ascetic, one who torments others (*parantapa*) like the hunter, one who torments oneself and others (*attantapo ca parantapo ca*) like the king, and finally one who torments neither himself nor others (*neva attantapo na parantapo*) like the *arahant*. Only the last type leads to detachment and freedom. As these types indicate, the occupation one undertakes to a great extent influences one's decisions and actions. So right livelihood is the fifth *marga*.

Spirituality of liberation

The third section of the eightfold path comprising the 6th, 7th and 8th margas shows the unique spirituality proposed by Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. The path to happiness for him is the path to mental stability, purity of mind, integration, awareness and tranquillity. But this can be understood only against the background of the other allied concepts like causality, karma, and rebirth. The first step in this direction indicated by right mindfulness or attention is to break the hold of karma and causal interdependence which are the basis of reincarnation. When one has destroyed the defiling impulses, has done what has to be done and laid aside the unnecessary burdens, one is in a position to gather together one's dissipated mental powers. Though one is still left with the mental substrate, through intensive mind control one can move towards the attainment of undifferentiated consciousness.

Even though one has not attained the highest state of freedom, the mind is trained to be supple and pliant, and one is able to turn or direct one's mind to perceive things that are generally beyond the range of normal senses. The seventh path of right-mindfulness enables one to develop extrasensory perception and verification of doctrines like rebirth and moral responsibility. Here belong the different stages of *jhana* or meditation. It begins with concentration on some sense stimulus such as a circle of light, red sand or even an image. The first stage is reached when one is able to suppress temporarily the unwholesome tendencies like ill-will, sloth, torpor and sense desire. At the next stage thinking ceases to be discursive and one adopts a more unified, peaceful and confident attitude. Rightmindfulness is reached through the four formless or *arupa jhanas*: in the first one perceives everything as boundless space, in the second this boundless space as mere consciousness, in the third consciousness as mere emptiness, and in the fourth one attains a state in which one relinquishes even the act that grasped the emptiness. This stage is characterised as neither perception nor nonperception.

The last of the eightfold path is right concentration. It reverses the process of embodiment and enslavement, which follows the series of ignorance, physical form, feeling, perception, dispositions and consciousness. When right concentration is attained there is a revulsion for physical form, feeling and the

like and being nonattached one attains freedom, and in him who is thus freed there arises knowledge of freedom. It may be termed a state of wisdom.

Nirvana, the final goal

It is clear that *nirvana*, the final state of liberation can be described only in relation to *samsara*: "For him who is attached, there is vacillation; for him who is not attached, there is no vacillation. When there is no vacillation, there is calm; when there is calm, there is no delight; when there is no delight, there is no coming and going; when there is no coming and going, there is no disappearance and appearance; when there is no disappearance and appearance, there is nothing here nor there or between them; this indeed is the end of suffering." (*Udana* 80) To describe the state after liberation with images and concepts drawn from the state of bondage will give only a very distorted picture. In fact, religion and morality deal only with this life and its problems. To overshoot the mark and to discuss life in terms of after life can only distract one from the present effort. Whether one is or not, after liberation, identical with the body or apart from the body or in the body are all metaphysical questions which have no relevance for a state beyond essence.

All that one can state regarding the state of liberation is that it is. Buddha says: "Monks, there is a not-born, not-become, not-made, not-compounded. Monks, if that not-born, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, no escape from the born, become, made, compounded would be known here." (*Udana* 81) Hence the meaning and role of discussing nirvana is to define clearly in its light the human tasks regarding this life so that they may lead to the attainment of final freedom. Nirvana, however, is not a negative concept. It is the positive goal of Buddhism. It can be experienced in this life as that for which the whole life has to be organized. In each moment of life, at every step along the right path one moves towards it through practices, the increasing knowledge of things, peace of mind and freedom from anxiety one is treading the path of Nirvana. The final and incomprehensible freedom offered by Nirvana is in brief the essential message of Buddhism to all human beings.

Faith and Religious Experience in African Religion

I. Introduction

What is the nature of African religion? Or what is the spirituality of Africa's native religious traditions? Current scholarship on African culture has problematized the above questions, unlike in the past when most philosophers, theologians and missionaries believed that Africa had no "real" religion, that Africans were incapable of conceiving the idea of God, or that the "savages" needed to be saved from the darkness of "fetishism". In the past, unlike now, most European anthropologists believed that Africa's was merely a "primitive" religion, full of superstition and magic¹.

This paper is not an apologetic for African traditional religious practices. I do not intend to argue about whether or not African religion is fetishistic, superstitious or magical, or whether those who practise the religion have (or do not have) the "proper" or "true" faith. This is rather an attempt to understand the nature of religious faith from the point of view of traditional African culture, through the religious practices in the tradition.

The questions we ought to begin with are: How does the traditional African understand faith, God, religious experience, or spirituality? What is the nature of religious existence in the traditional African cultures? What is the effect or the impact of traditional African religious faith and practices on the individual and social life? And finally, what is the specificity, or in what consists the originality of experience, expression and understanding

1 See, for example, Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (trans. by J. Sibree, London: George Bell & Sons, 1894); Levy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, trans. by L. A. Claire, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1923; etc.

that traditional African religion has to offer to humanity? We shall explore answers to these questions by examining the African beliefs and understandings about God and faith, spirituality and religious experience, worship and communal religious existence².

II. God: a Primal Force

It is either ignorance or ethnocentrism that prompted Hegel to ask, rhetorically, "How can an untutored African conceive God?" The traditional African does not need to be "tutored" in (European or Hegelian) religion or theology in order to understand, as far as it is possible for humans, the nature of God or of religious life. In Mongo Beti's piquant novel, *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, a European missionary priest working in Africa wondered why the people are no longer receptive to Christianity as they were twenty years before. His African cook answered: "The first of us who came flocking to religion, to your religion, came there as if to a revelation — that's it, as a revelation of your secret, the secret of your power, the power of your aeroplanes, your railways and so on...the secret of your mystery in fact... Instead of that, you started to talk to them about God, the soul, eternal life and so forth. Do you think that they didn't know about that already long before your arrival?..."³ Indeed, the African religious traditions

2 I should note that it is often asked: Is there one African religion, or are there many African religions? Should we talk about one tradition or about many traditions of African religion? The pertinence of the questions derives from the argument that religion is embedded in culture, and if there are reasons to talk about many African cultures, then, why not talk about many African religions, or at least many traditions of African religion. My position is the following: Although, on the surface, African religious practices may present diverse or even opposed tendencies on, say, the rubrics of a ritual (yam used for sacrifice instead of cassava, gin used for libation instead of palm-wine, feasts held in dry season instead of rainy season, etc.) there lies beneath the surface an essential affinity which derives from commonalities in the people's vision of the world, theories of origin, ideas about nature, life and existence. To look at African religious beliefs and practices at this level reveals not only an underlying and recurrent pattern of similar theological infrastructures, but also a fundamental unity of cultural and spiritual traditions. It is at this level that I raise and explore the questions about the fundamental meaning of religious faith and spirituality in traditional Africa.

3 Mongo Beti, *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, Paris, 1956, p. 56. Quoted in Jahn Janhainz, *Muntu: The New African Culture*, New York: Grove Press, 1961, p. 213.

developed highly complex theological conceptions of God and the universe, life and the world, faith and experience, and so on. The traditional African, for example, conceives of God as Life Force, vitality, or primal energy that enabled all things to come into being, and enables them to be. God is the primal energy that permeates and animates as well as maintains organic balance and order and harmony in the universe and in all things.

An African theological tradition speculates that in the beginning was inchoate nothing, out of which being and order emerged. The original and supreme embodiment of being is God, who goes under various names among the different African peoples⁴. God, then, is the essential power of being. That is why the Bantus of Central and other parts of Africa think of God as *force vitale*⁵, for God, indeed is the vital energy that enables all things, animate and inanimate, to be.

God is thought of as transcendent of all things, yet immanent. He is transcendent because he is the creator who enables all else to be. He is immanent because he is the very sustenance of existence. God is called *aka ji uwa*, "the hand that holds the world" because he not only made it come into being, but also enables it to persist.

The universe is conceived as dynamic, and the dynamism is of God's own power. It is for this reason that African religious traditions evolved a highly complex nexus of gods, goddesses and spirits — pantheons — who make up the divine order of being and of the universe. The divinities, as principles, embody the various forces of being and of nature, which interact among themselves to maintain balance and order and harmony in the world. Disruption of this order and harmony manifests itself in visible or invisible disjunctures and imbalances in the order of things that may result in material catastrophes, such as earthquakes, epidemics, holes in the ozone layer, or the like. God, transcendent

4 Among the Fon, the supreme being is called *Mawu*, the Igbos call it *Chukwu* the Yorubas, *Olorun*. The Akans of Ghana call it *Niaben*, the Bambaras, *Masa Dambaléh*; God is *Amma* for the Dogons, *Wennéh* for the Mossis, *Guebo Dundari* for the Fulanis, *Djalla-Ngey* for the Wollofs, *Loah* for the Sarah of Nuambi, *Si* for the Bamilekes, *Imana* for the Tutsis, *Indulunkulu* for the Zulus, *Zanahary* for the Madagascan, etc.

5 See: Placide Tépéts, *La Philosophie Bantoue*, Paris: Présence Africaine, '59

yet immanent, is the ontological power that maintains the entire chain of life and being that is the universe.

The notion of God as "vital force" which is predominant among the Bantus, is obviously parallel to the Yoruba concept of *ashé*. *Ashé* has been translated as "power", "the power-to-make-things-happen" or the creative source of all that there is⁶. *Ashé*, as the creative force that propagates⁷ itself and all things, is conceived of as embodied in or personified as God. Thus, Yoruba mythology understands God (*Olorum, Olodumare*) as the quintessence of *ashe* as the personification of the primal creative force. It is remarkable to note that the primal force, *ashe*, predates the existence of God.

In the beginning was *ashe*. When *ashe* began to think, *Ashe* became *Olodumare* (God). When *Olodumare* acted, He became *Olofi*, and it was *Olofi* who, out of a part of himself, created *Obatala*⁸.

In this story of origin *Obatala* became two beings, one male, one female, and this first couple became the parents of the first deities (*orishas*) as well as humans. Thus, it was *Obatala* (the god of creativity) who created humans with the power of *ashe* (embodied in God, *Olodumare*). *Ashe* is the divine potentiality, spiritual and rational, of the human.

It is because of the primal-creative nature of *ashe* that scholars have translated "ashe" as the creative Word, or *logos*. According to Henry Louis Gates,

We can translate *ase* in many ways, but the *ase* used to create the universe I translate as "logos", as the word, as understanding, the word as the audible, and later the visible, sign of reason⁹.

Ashe, in this sense, is the principle of intelligibility, or the principle of coherence and order, rationality itself. It is that which holds

6 Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 5

7 Juana Elbein dos Santos and Deoscoredes M. dos Santos, *Esu Bara Laroye: A Comparative Study*, Ibadan: Institute of African Studies, 1971, p. 80.

8 Miriam Simos, *Dreaming the Dark*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1988, p. 34.

9 Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 7

all together and in balance, it is that which makes the universe as cosmos instead of chaos. Ashe is also that which makes the unique dignity of the human being, for it is the very nature of Olodumare which the Yoruba believes is innate to the human – the principle of spirituality and reason.

III. The Human Vocation: a Destiny

The African generally accords the utmost respect to God (as Life Force) and to human life in particular. The uniqueness of the human being comes from the belief that the human person is the embodiment of ashe, a quality of God's own nature. The divine nature in the human confers a particular dignity on the individual: it endows the individual with a *destiny*. The fact that human life is endowed with ashe means that the individual is "destined" to bring to fruition in one's particular existence the divine qualities of spirituality and reason. It is this project of realizing the divine in the human that characterizes for the native African the nature of both human and religious existence. Life, indeed, is fully human when it is lived according to the divine will. Humanization, or becoming a person, is a process of growing and sharing more and more in the qualities of reason (wisdom and knowledge), hope and gratitude, charity and generosity, hospitality and sacrifice, and such other divine-human qualities.

Thus, for the traditional African, religious life, or religious training, is a way of becoming fully a person, of perfecting and bringing to fruition in one's being the unique qualities (of ashe) endowed the human by God the creator. Religious life is also a way of sharing with a community, the living and the ancestors, that sacred trust of life which binds everyone and all things to God. The African religious life grows out of a quest for God as well as for meaning in a life shared in community. Religious quest, as primordial to human existence, articulately embodies and expressively actualizes the fundamental conception of life, individual or social, as not only destined but also as destiny (*akara-aka, chi*).

It should be pointed out that the notion of "destiny", as conceived in the African religious tradition, does not have the ring of absolute determinism or even fatalism which the word might suggest in the English language. *Akara-aka*, or one's *chi*, is labile,

and subject to reasoning and rational deliberation throughout the course of life, and in concrete, real life-situations. In fact, the only thing determined about destiny is the recognition of its existence; its historical realization is open-ended¹⁰.

"Destiny", for the African, articulates an understanding and a recognition that the quest for the attainment of God or of fullness of being in human life is a project. It is the conception and a recognition of human life as a journey — pursued, constantly, throughout a life-time. God, by endowing the individual with *ashe*, as potentiality, *de facto* sets the human on a journey and a mission: a mission to be more godly, more holy, wiser, and so on. For the African, the religious is one who recognizes the divine imperative in life, and as a consequence strives through religious ethic and rituals to experience and deepen not only the significance of God in his or her individual life, but also the meaning and fullness of being through a life shared in community.

Religious values and rituals such as the ceremonies of initiation are meant to awaken in the individual a sense of the spirit, a sense of God, a sense of destiny. God, spirit, or destiny — in terms of the individual life — can be indistinguishably conceived of as *chi* (Igbo) or *ori* (Yoruba), i. e., as that divine "spark" ("breath"?) potentially innate to individual being. It is *Chi* or *Ori* which binds the individual to the supreme Source of Life, and so is at the root of human and religious yearning to actualize the divine and the eternal as a way of bringing life to success and fruition. Religious initiation is a process designed to awaken in the individual this deeper need for actualization of life. The symbols and sacramentals of the initiation ritual, when fruitfully experienced, "show" the candidate the footsteps of God and of ancestors who in themselves are models or exemplars of life fully lived, and of destiny truly accomplished.

We shall attempt to understand, in what follows, the process of initiation and its vital importance in the religious life of the traditional African.

10 This is why the seeking of knowledge about destiny and about God's will in one's life, i. e., discernment, through Ifa (oracular, divination) practice is a permanent feature of traditional religious life.

IV. Initiation¹¹

A. In the African tradition the rite of initiation is a process of awakening in the young a sense of the spiritual. It is a way of leading the initiate-to-be to seek the fullness of being through experience of the deeper religious dimensions of reality.

The institution of initiation is predicated on the anthropological assumption that the human person seeks wholeness of being. The anthropological assumption however entails a theological one: if God is the fullness of being, then, it is, in fact, experience of the divine that would actualize for the individual the fullness of life. Religious initiation is initiation into the way of quest for God who is, for the religious, the joy and significance of being. The theological framework that structures the experience of the initiate thus, derives from the experiential level of reality. It derives from the human experience of oneself as finite yet thirsting for the infinite; temporal but yearning for the eternal; whole yet differentiated. What is at the root of this paradoxical but fundamental human experience?

A Yoruba religious tradition speculates that in the mythical beginning was an original Oneness in the person of Orisa-nla, a solitary godhead, who was, however, shattered into a thousand-and-one fragments by the jealous slave Atunda, who rolled a huge boulder from a hill down the back of the deity while the deity was watering his garden. The incident, which gave birth to the Yoruba pantheon also set in motion the course of human history, and is at the root of both divine and human ontological experience of differentiation. The experience of disintegration suffered by the godhead is the beginning of the human quest for wholeness; it is the beginning of history and temporality: the human experience of finitude, death, as well as the yearning for eternity and re-birth. Initiation experience brings a religious resolution to bear on the paradoxical problem of human experience of temporality

11 The religious significance of initiation rites in Africa is more often than not misunderstood. Ethnographers frequently characterize initiation rites only in their sociological-functional aspect, i. e., as a means of integrating the youth into the responsibilities and the privileges of adult life. This sociological function of initiation rites is a fact; but it is only half of the picture. The deeper religious and spiritual intentions of the process has remained largely unexplored.

and transcendence. Human destiny would lead not just from life to death, but also to re-birth. The African religious life, thus, situates the individual in a cyclic rhythm of being. The Gods, the ancestors, and the unborn, together with the living humans, are participants in the religious, ritual and mundane activities which ensure the cyclic, regenerative processes of life and of the universe.

Religious initiation is meant to awaken the individual to the historical and transcendental, temporal and spiritual significance of life. Through material symbols, the individual is led to a ritual experience of death and resurrection. The initiate experiences — and attempts to bridge — the gap between the material and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal, the human and the divine. The ritual affirmation of the infinite stretch of human spirituality is a religious negation of the supremacy of death, and a celebration of the triumph of life.

Initiation, then, as a ritual journey, is meant to introduce the candidate for initiation into an essentially religious significance of life. He is told the story that in the beginning when the humanity first evaded death the human community sent an emissary to God, pleading, "God, Lord God, deliver us from this evil. Why must a living human being be devoured by death?" God, in response, gazed deeply into the emissary's face and answered: "My child, you do not know what it is to live. Go and teach your children that without death, life would no longer be life." *Voilà!* the origin of the institution of initiation: to teach the young that true life is a re-birth, a resurrection. The initiation ceremony enacts the life-death-re-birth cycle, and its essence is the affirmation of the way of Life over the way of Death, good over evil, love over hate etc.

B. The initiation ceremony usually begins at the end of the harvest season, and lasts anywhere from a few weeks to three months. The candidates, all boys or girls¹² are usually between ages twelve and fifteen. The entire village community is involved in several weeks of preparation: from the elders who would lead the youth through the actual initiation process, to the parents who

12 Girls and boys undergo separate forms of initiation experience. What follows is a description of the male version.

build up the confidence of their children, and anxiously await the day the young men leave home for the bush where the core rites of initiation take place. Preparation, on the part of the candidates, includes the learning of ritual songs, music and dance-steps, participation in the alternate periods of fasting and feasting, and in such other activities that build up and re-enforce the sense of expectancy for the candidates and for the entire village.

When the time for seclusion comes, the candidates leave the village for a camp in the bush. The seclusion from the mundane and the familiar provides for the candidates and their guides the quiet and the solitude needed for prayer and reflection, in the light of the experience of transformation that the candidates are seeking. It also re-enforces in the young adult the significance of the journey he is embarking upon: he is in quest of a new identity, spiritual and social. He is no longer a child, attached to and inseparable from Mom and Dad. But more importantly, he is in search of wisdom of life, ready to learn the meaning of being as embodied in the culture and tradition, illumined by God and the ancestors.

Thus, the experience of separation and seclusion enables the candidate to seek not just self-identity, but also the identity of the God and of the ancestors, *and* the nature of his relationship to them. A preparatory prayer, repeatedly recited usually at the beginning of the sojourn in the bush, articulates this double quest for self-identity and self-identification with the God and with the ancestors. The prayer goes:

Dieu la-haut, qui es-tu? Oú es-tu?
 Esprit de mes ancêtres, êtes-vous là?
 Moi, ici-bas, que suis-je?
 Qui suis-je en regard de ce que vous êtes?
 God on high, who are you? Where are you?
 Spirits of my ancestors, are you there?
 I, here below, who am I?
 Who am I with regard to what you are?¹³

The spiritual yearning of the candidate which is at the heart of the initiation enterprise is here made manifest. The period of

13 Cf. A. T. Sannon, "Religion et Spiritualité Africaine", *L'Afrique et sa Vie Spirituelle*, Kinshasa, Faculté de Théologie Catholique, 1983. p. 51. (My translation).

seclusion in the bush is a period of waiting — a waiting for the beginning of the experience of revelation of what we are in the face of God, and as historical destinies.

The religious individual defines himself as historically destined (i. e. pro-ject) by God and the ancestors; it is the meaning of this experience of projection that is sought to be revealed in the experience of the initiate. The individual, in experiencing the dimensions and the meaning of being, is enabled to affirm and consolidate a foundation for individual and social existence, i. e., for the historical actualization of life as destiny. It is the success of this experience that separates the initiate from the non-initiate.

The initiate, in the bush, is truly in the spirit of *attente*. The group offers preparatory sacrifices and prayers to the ancestors and the benevolent spirits pleading for their protection and guidance. Besides the acknowledgement that the candidate is about to tread the path of the ancestors¹⁴, there exist other good reasons to pray: namely, the path of initiation is fraught with danger. Several parts of the process are designed to test the individual and instill in him physical and moral courage. Ordeals are meant to introduce into the candidate a sense of the precariousness and the fragility of life. The candidate must experience profound psychological tensions and interior turmoil (*désarroi*), a "scattering" of the personality¹⁵. The candidate is stretched to the limits of human endurance. The goal, however, is to lead the individual to the experience of faith, hope, and trust in God, as well as in the tradition. It is faith, hope and trust that lead the candidate to the

14 "Initiation/fait entrer dans une experience de quete profonde/qui conduit a la dimension final/de tout (le mystere)/la ou par le symbole/l'unite ou sa promotion rejoint/l' itineraire mythique/du premier ancesstre" (A. T. Sannon, *op. cit.*, p. 46)

15 The role of the elders as spiritual guides to the initiate is crucial here, for the candidate submits himself to untold stress and turmoil, and such enormous strain upon youth can lead to irreparable damage in the form of a permanent breakdown or disintegration of self. It is under the watchful guide of elders that the individual undertakes the journey of initiation, having been duly educated in the appropriate attitude of availability and generosity of spirit — qualittes indispensable for the experience of faith and hope, without which meaningful spiritual or religious experience is impossible.

experience of spiritual humility and surrender. The experience of surrender to the spiritual powers greater than oneself gives to the individual the infinite stretch of will and courage indispensable for one's physical, psychological, spiritual and moral survival. It is in losing oneself that one finds it, and through death that life is found.

The guided ordeal that the candidate goes through (including fasting, staying awake all night, sleeping in the open, etc.) leads up to one of the climaxes of the ceremony, the "March of Death". Obviously there are many other climactic and essential parts of the ceremony, but time and space allow us to discuss only the March. The March of Death is the symbolic experience of death and return to life. For this ritual, each candidate is wrapped, from head to knee, in the "cloth of death", *n'gurigula*, the same cloth used to wrap and bury the dead¹⁶. Wrapping the candidate in the *n'gurigula* symbolizes and expresses not only the candidate's "readiness" to die (Boe), but also an actual ritual experience of death — for it is only by dying that the candidate will live¹⁷.

Besides the "cloth of death", other symbols of the initiation ceremony include a long reed given to the candidate to hold on to during the stressful and anxiety-ridden process. The reed symbolizes the support of the community. The candidate also wears

16 A German missionary, Peter Boe, abusively interpreted this ritual clothing as aimed at instilling in the young "deathly seriousness" ("Circumcision — The Rite of Manhood in the Bille Tribe", *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, edited by E. A. Ade Adegbola, Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1983, p. 78.) Boe did not sufficiently grasp the religious significance of Bille circumcision. Not even his disclaimer ("I felt no reservations about marching in dancing steps side-by-side with them and singing *Wo, Woye ya ka Bali-ya!* There was one big difference: I had not come to attach the sacramental significance to circumcision that these people have") justifies the explaining away of the ritual as "treated [only] as a sacrament" (pp. 74; 82; italics mine). In its religious context, circumcision is not merely treated "as" sacrament; it *is* a sacrament. In fairness, however, Boe shows some awareness of the religious nature of the rite, when, for example, he noted and identified the leader of the initiation rites as "an elderly man who seemed to know the 'tribal bible' by heart" (81). He might have also had genuine empathy for the ceremony when he says: "during the Wednesday 'march of death' I experienced in myself a 'lump' of grief and sorrow while walking side-by-side with the wailing women" (82).

17 Cf. above, p. 20: "Go, teach your children that without death, life would no longer be life."

a medicine horn and a whistle around the neck. The medicine is believed to keep away the malevolent spirits, while the whistle is for the candidate to blow as loudly or as angrily as he desires as a vent to fear, anxiety or frustration. Moreover, when the candidates are in a file doing the ritual dance-steps, they are instructed to put both hands on the shoulders of the person ahead, to symbolize, in an unbroken circle, their solidarity.

Several other kinds of costume worn at the liturgy of initiation also suggest a wider sense of solidarity. The liturgical dresses suggest awareness of the cosmic dimension of the ritual, or a mystical experience of the forces of nature¹⁸. For example, animal horn is worn around the neck, a tree (reed) is in hand for support, bird-feathers are mounted on headdress, etc.: all is connected to all, and the human being is nature in miniature, a microcosmos. The human is the mouthpiece and mediator of the creation to the creator. The liturgical dress expresses a universal solidarity of life, and a cosmic communion with all.

As parents await and pray at home for the return of their young (and sometimes in fear and anxiety about whether their son can survive the ordeal), they prepare for the celebration of their sons' return — a return which is also a re-birth, the beginning of a new life.

The return to the village is as ceremonial as any other part of the ritual. The initiates, the neophytes, are now clothed in rich and colorful robes. Magnificent head-pieces (*jmeda*) are fitted. Fasting ends with a breakfast, and the entire day is devoted to feasting and drumming and dancing. (The tension and sombreness of the previous rituals such as the "march of death" is gone, new

18 This is *not* to suggest, however, some kind of "raw", unmediated experience of oneness with nature, as some commentators tend to interpret intuitive, cosmic empathy that a religious might experience. The initiate-to-be seeks to experience not only self-identification with the natural forces of life, but also — and perhaps more importantly — a self identity (as shown in prayer on p. 22). This identity is born out of the struggle for the integrity and the integration of self — in the face of stress, fear, death or such other forces inimical to one's being. The ritual costume harnesses the benevolent forces of nature and enlists them on the side of self and life. There is an assertion of the uniqueness of self, an affirmation of life-in-relation-with-the cosmic forces of nature.

persons are born, let us be glad and rejoice!) The candidate has experienced spiritual awakening. The joy and significance of life was underscored by the ordeal of initiation; the return is a celebration and affirmation of the triumph of life, and the reinforcing of communal values.

C. The anthropology underlying African religion can be discerned from the spirituality of its initiation practices. As already observed, the experience of religious initiation starts for the young a process of integration into the responsibilities and privileges of the adult community. The individual is a new person. The experience of initiation accomplishes a transformation of the individual, enabling him to acquire and assume a new sense and vision of life and of the self as historical destiny. Re-birth concretizes itself in the taking-on of new roles and responsibilities in society: perhaps marriage, priesthood, a particular trade, ownership and management of a portion of the communal farmland, social and political meetings with elders, and so on. Relationships as well take on new meanings, as the individual is trusted with greater and greater communal responsibilities *because* he has gone through the process of instruction and education in the values of the people.

The initiate finds himself and a new life in the group, in the community. This means an insertion into the life of a tradition and acceptance of its founding norms and values. This ensures the historical continuity of the people and the civilization, as well as gives the initiate a felt sense of intimacy with the past and a vision of a future.

The initiate experience also renews the tradition. The young does not simply blindly submit to the old ways, but may exercise creative and more or less critical appropriation of wisdom and knowledge, values and norms. New talents and ingenuities are brought to bear on traditional problems and needs, or to identify new ones. Inventiveness, such as discoveries in the techniques of farming, medicine, and other forms of learning are encouraged in the youth so that the tribe can meet old or new challenges (famine, diseases, record-keeping, war, diplomacy etc.). The community, accordingly, celebrates and rewards breakthroughs in research and creativity, and these rejuvenate the

culture and the tradition. Thus, each cycle of initiation is usually marked by extraordinary outbursts of creativity, technical and artistic. The experience of initiation teaches not only *savoir être* but also *savoir faire*.

The thrust and emphasis of the initiation ceremony remains, however, a pointer to an idea of the spiritual itinerary of a religious. Initiation is the onset of the journey toward spiritual (and psychological) maturation. It is a journey that proceeds along the Path of Life traced out by the Gods and the ancestors in the tradition. The quest for maturity and fullness of being re-enacts essentially the differentiation suffered, and the subsequent "journey" for successful re-union achieved by the gods and the ancestors in the Origin¹⁹. The quest for wholeness begins with awareness of one's incompleteness, and the fullness of being sought after does not mean dissolution of the individual in the One, but rather affirmation of a unique existence through enlightenment and deeper self-awareness.

The wisdom and knowledge acquired as/in self-knowledge bears upon the sense of a historical destiny of self. *Se connaître, c'est se posséder*; the wise person conducts himself as he understands himself²⁰. Religious initiation dramatizes the significance of self-knowledge and self-possession, as prerequisites for meaningful individual or collective life. Religious initiation is initiation into the way of wisdom, knowledge and love (responsibility). It is initiation into the Path of Life.

Initiation, then, is not a means of illusory escape from the world or from its mundane reality. The spirituality of initiation rather enables immersion into the real life of a community and of a historical people. The individual "saves" his soul not through disincarnate religious yearning, but rather in and through a life of self-giving (love, responsibility) and generosity fully lived in community, for the community, God and the ancestors. Religious life in this sense is quest for the fullness of life, the wholeness of individual and social being.

19 Cf. page 11

20 Or: as my father would say, in another proverb, *Anu n'amaghi onwe ya bu Uhuégari*. Free translation: One who does not know himself is not (truly) alive.

Conclusion

In summary, we can articulate the following as the originality of traditional African religion. First of all, it has a *definite sense of life*. This derives from the understanding of God as Life Force. *Ashe* is that power of God by which all things come to be, it is that nature of God from which the uniqueness of human life derives, and it is the web of life that holds all as in a balance. Human life reflects the divine through identification with Life and in seeking harmony and equilibrium with the forces of nature. Religious life, the journey of the faithful, is pursuit of the Path of Life, a pursuit that endows the individual life as well as communal existence with destiny.

Secondly, there is in African religion an emphasis — theological as well as ethical — on *solidarity*. There is solidarity i) between God/gods/the ancestors and humans, ii) between humans, and iii) between God, humans and nature. God in nature and in history communicates his vitality of power, energy and life. There is a recognition that everything is connected in a hierarchy of beings. This hierarchy is a dynamic one, not a static conception of compartments. God is the primal "force", the original energy that animates all that is. Because everything participates in the primal being of God, there is a fundamental unity and interdependence in the universe, by virtue of which an alliance of laws, causal as well as mystical, exists between the Gods, the dead, the living and unborn.

Thirdly, African religion recognizes as absolute the *necessity of initiation* in religious life. The rite of initiation holds a vital place in the traditional African spirituality. The very foundation of religious life and practices is based upon the paradoxical human experience of life and death, ritually resolved and celebrated in the religious experience of a re-birth and affirmation of life. The experience of initiation intensifies the joy and the significance of life, and so stimulates the initiate to greater effort in living. The supremacy/finality of death is relativized, showing that the spiritual virtues of self is just as important as physical existence in the realization of personhood. Initiation reveals the person as a balance of forces: an integration of faith (God), nature community, and the interiority of self.

Finally, central to the African religion is *the idea of destiny*. This is the sense of an existential imperative or obligation on the part of the individual to manifest and actualize the fullness of ashè, the divine potentiality innately endowed by the creator. It is the ashe-potentiality that Africans conceive as destiny (*chi, akara-aka*). A religious being is primarily defined by *chi*, the divine potential which endows one with unique qualities of soul, intelligence and spiritual character. The historical realization of *Chi, akara aka*, as destiny, is considered the one essential and incessant pursuit of the religious person throughout entire life-time.

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Thomas Merton and the East: a Westerner's Quest for Transcultural Consciousness

Our planet is becoming more and more a single whole undergoing a process variously known as 'world unification', 'cosmification' or 'trans-culturalization'. This growing sense of global smallness has been extremely influential in the religious sphere and has led to the view that it is no longer possible for the various religious traditions to exist in isolation. There is an emerging consciousness on the part of the leaders of religion of the need for 'coming together' sharing what they have in common and travelling together as pilgrims on the road of life. The man of the future will find new ways to enlarge his religious experience and spiritual life, not merely through those found within his own tradition, but also through the radically different religious experiences and ways of other great traditions. Thomas Merton gives expression to this vital need for encounter of religions when he says: "I am convinced that communication in depth across the lives that have hitherto divided religions and monastic traditions is now not only possible and desirable but most important for the destinies of the twentieth century man"¹.

According to Merton, if humankind is to be made whole again and if the world is to be healed of the spiritual disasters that lead to material ones, there must be a rapprochement between the Eastern and Western religions. As part of this process, the Church must open herself to learning from the Eastern religions as in her early days she had been exposed to the philosophical influences of Platonism, Gnosticism etc. It is this desire to learn from the other religious traditions and reach full Christian maturity that led Merton to the East. Before describing Merton's turning to the East, a brief biographical note seems to be in order.

Thomas Merton was poet, artist, writer, monk, priest, spiritual director, hermit, contemplative and social critic, all in

1 Merton, *The Asian Journal*, (New York, 1975), p. 313.

one. Born in Prades, France on January 31, 1915, he migrated to the United States with his parents, when he was one year old. Merton lost his parents and the only brother when he was young, and his college days in Columbia and Cambridge were mostly a period of undisciplined life and outlandish behaviour. His careless youthful life took a new turn when he seriously heeded to the advice of his professors and began reading books like Huxley's *Ends and Means*, Augustine's *Confessions* and Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. It finally resulted in his conversion to Catholicism, and his eventual entry into the Cistercian Order.

Merton joined the trappist abbey of Gethsemani in Louisville, U. S. A. on December 10, 1941 and lived there twenty seven years as a monk until his death on December 10, 1968. Merton had an inborn instinct for writing. The nearly seventy books published after his entry into the monastery include five autobiographical items, three biographies, six theological works, twenty popular works on spiritual life, six volumes of social commentary, twelve volumes of poetry and four books on Asian religions. It was his autobiography — *The Seven Storey Mountain* — that made Merton known to the world. It is a book concerned with self-scrutiny and inner search and it beautifully reflects the pulse of post-war America. It became the symbol and guide to the plight of the contemporary world touching Catholics and non-Catholics alike in their deep alienated consciousness.

His attitude to other religions

During the first decade of his monastic life, Merton cherished a kind of narrow and superficial notion about Oriental religions. He criticized them with charges of pantheism, immanentism and absorptionism. His language in *The Seven Storey Mountain* suggested lack of respect, if not hostility towards other faiths.

In the early sixties, Merton began taking a more positive attitude towards the East. After long search for God in solitude he came to the realization that God's communication was not limited to Christians only and that there could be real mystics in other religions. He criticized with vigour the narrow Catholic mentality which held that 'everyone else is malicious or ignorant and that all that is required is for everyone to listen to us and agree with us in everything from faith to table manners and taste in

art. Then the world will be all right"². Such a view, he explained, naively assumes that we still have thirteenth century or post-Tridentine Christendom. Its holders are not Catholics in the true sense of the term:

The Catholic who is the aggressive specimen of a ghetto Catholic culture, limited, rigid, prejudiced and negative is precisely a non-Catholic, at least in the cultural sense. Worse still, he may be anti-Catholic in the cultural sense, and perhaps even, in some ways, religiously, without realizing it³.

Merton believed that the negative and narrow attitude of many Catholics towards other religions is due to a lack of understanding of them. He was convinced that the Oriental religions deserve deeper study and analysis. The very essence of being a 'Catholic' is to have the openness and ability to enter into dialogue with all that is pure and holy outside the Christian religion. "A Christian culture that is not capable of such a dialogue would show", according to Merton, "by that very fact, that it lacked Catholicity"⁴.

West needs East

What prompted Merton more to take deep interest in and make serious study of Eastern religions was a growing conviction that the Western society had a great *lacuna* which the wisdom of the East might help to fill. In his book, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Merton wrote about this "incompleteness of the West" and the need for complementarities with the East and criticized the West for holding on instinctively to the prejudice that "our world and our civilization are the whole world" and pointed out that the "world is bigger than we have imagined and its new directions are not always those that we ourselves have envisaged"⁵. He emphasized the need for turning to the East with a note of caution that "if the West continues to underestimate and neglect the spiritual heritage of the East, it may hasten the tragedy that threatens man and his civilization"⁶.

In 1962, in an essay entitled "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom", Merton put forward a valid reason for the study of Eastern religions in the West. "The study of the humanities in the West", he insisted, "absolutely must introduce an element of contemplation as well as action". This cannot be achieved simply by going back to European and Christian cultural traditions: "Westerners can no longer afford to shrug off the Eastern faiths as "pantheistic" and 'quietistic". These religions offer values in the realm of spiritual experience which are

2 Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, (NY, 1980), p. 269. 3. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

4 See, Thomas P. McDonnell, ed. *A Thomas Merton Reader*, (NY, 1974), p.303.

5 See, Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, (N.Y., 1959), p. 46. 6. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

not unlike "supernatural wisdom" itself". In a letter to a Chinese priest in California, written about the same time as the above essay, Merton emphasized that Westerners have much to learn from the East:

I do not know if I have anything to offer Asians, but I am convinced that I have an immense amount to learn from Asia. One of the things I would like to share with Asians is not only Christ but Asia itself. I am convinced that a rather superficial Christianity in European dress is not enough for Asia⁹.

Merton agreed with Karl Rahner's thesis of the "diaspora situation" of contemporary Christianity⁹. This means that the traditional Christendom in which Christianity was the dominant religious institution of Western culture no longer prevails today. In other words, Christianity is undergoing a process of detachment from its inherited Western forms – it is being summoned to a form of trans-culturalization. Merton says that we may lament this, but that nonetheless it is a divine summons to us in Christianity. It is in this context that we have to understand Merton's call for "the growth of a truly universal consciousness in the modern world"¹⁰.

Need for involved study

According to Merton, in order to understand properly the depth and meaning of Oriental religions, one has to 'enter' into these traditions and make them 'one's own'. He believed that he could do this in-depth study by being perfectly faithful to his own Christian tradition. Hence from 1961 on, he began to study Asian religions in a more intense and systematic manner. Asia became his major concern towards the end of his life as is evident from his significant publications during that period: *Gandhi on Non-violence* (1964), *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), and the posthumously published, *The Asian Journal* (1972).

Merton studied the Chinese mystical philosophy of Taoism and came to appreciate its wisdom. He believed that Taoism could add many things to Christianity. For example, Taoism with its emphasis on contemplative life could help Christianity re-affirm its need for contemplation. A by-product of his deep interest and searching study of Taoism was his book, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, a poetic paraphrase of selected writings of Chuang Tzu, a third century B.C. Chinese philosopher and the chief spokesman of Taoism. Throughout the book Merton points out similarities of Chuang Tzu's thought to that of Christianity. He actually proved

7 Thomas P. McDonnell, op. cit. pp. 301-2.

8 Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 287.

9 See, "Christian in Diaspora", in *Seeds of Destruction*, pp. 184-219.

10 Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 317.

that Chuang Tzu could be used to teach the truth which some might believe as containing only within the domains of Christianity and on a personal level, Merton considered his dealings with Chuang Tzu "most rewarding"¹¹.

Though Merton was interested in Eastern religions as a whole, it was Zen Buddhism that attracted his attention most. It was a Japanese Zen Master, the late Dr. D. T. Suzuki who gave him an insight into Zen. Merton was much impressed with Suzuki's writings which he considered "the most complete, authentic presentation of an Asian Tradition and experience available to English speaking readers"¹². He started a written dialogue with Suzuki in 1959 during the time of publication of his book, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, a translation of the selected sayings of the Desert Fathers. Merton was struck by the resemblance of some of the sayings of the Fathers with those of the Japanese Zen Masters¹³. He sent the text of his translation to Dr. Suzuki expressing his desire to enter into a dialogue about the wisdom of the Desert Fathers and that of the Zen Masters.

Merton realized that Zen if grasped from inside is not in conflict with Christianity. They are not on the same level for him. Zen is not a religion as Christianity is. But he believed that Christianity and Zen are compatible¹⁴. But he made it clear that we cannot compare them as religions or on the level of doctrines. But he saw the possibility of comparing them on the level of experience though the theology which explains that experience will be different. The fact is that Zen is possible for Christianity – at least for Catholic Christianity – as for Buddhism, for "the heart of Catholicism, too is a *living* experience of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations"¹⁵.

Zen was particularly useful for Merton when dealing with the problem of dualism, especially that between sacred and secular, physical and spiritual, contemplation and action. For Merton, Zen experience is a direct grasp of the *unity* of the invisible and the visible... Zen neither affirms nor denies anything. It simply is. Zen is the immediate grasp of being in its 'suchness' and 'thusness'¹⁶. Merton was able to say that "it is quite possible for Zen to be adapted and used to clear the air of ascetic irrelevancies and help us to regain a healthy natural balance in our understanding

11 Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, (NY, 1969), p. 10.

12 Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, (NY, 1968), p. 63.

13 *Ibid.*, 100, 106–7.

14 Dom Aelred Graham, *Zen Catholicism: A Suggestion*, London, 1964 and William Johnston, *Christian Zen*, NY, 1971 also suggest the possibility of compatibility between Christianity and Zen.

15 Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 33.

16 Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, pp. 13–4.

of spiritual life"¹⁷. Zen experience confirmed for Merton what he had already discovered in his Christian contemplation, i. e., "that we do not really choose between the world and Christ as between two conflicting realities absolutely opposed. Rather, we choose Christ by choosing the world as it is in him"¹⁸.

Merton's attraction to Zen was so deep that he went as far as to say: "I am much closer to Confucius and Lao Tzu than my contemporaries in the U. S."¹⁹. He even had a dream once that he had become a "Zen monk"²⁰, and confided to Marco Pallis that "I am as much a Chinese Buddhist by temperament and spirit as I am a Christian"²¹.

Trip to Asia

Merton's strong desire to understand Asia and Asian religions from within and enter into dialogue with the leaders of those religions prompted him to make a trip to Asia in the September of 1968²². Merton described his way to Asia as being on his "true way": "The take off was ecstatic... We left the ground - I with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny of being at last on my true way after years of waiting and wandering and fooling around"²³. He also described it as a "going home", to the home "I have never been in this body, where I have never been in this washable suit... where I have never been with these suit-cases"²⁴. It is not easy to grasp all what this "going home" meant for him. It gives the impression that he was dissatisfied with the West and was looking for something 'beyond' which he thought he would find in the East. As Eudes Bamberger, Merton's friend and colleague in the monastery has suggested, he surely meant that there in Asia he would find "the great solution", that is to say, the full realization of the transcendent self"²⁵. In fact it was a real "going home", to his eternal home because Merton never returned from that trip back to Gethsemani. He died of accidental electrocution on December 10, 1968 in Bangkok, exactly on the twenty-seventh anniversary of his entry into the Gethsemani abbey²⁶.

17 Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 58.

18 Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York, 1973), p. 115

19 Merton to Archbishop Yu Pin, February, 1961. unpublished letter found in the archives of the Thomas Merton Studies Center, Louisville, U. S. A.

20 Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 107.

21 Merton to Marco Pallis, n. d. unpublished letter found in the archives of T. M. S. C. Louisville, U. S. A.

22 During this trip Merton was also to attend a conference of monastic leaders in Bangkok and give a talk on "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives". See, *Asian Journal*, pp. 326-343. 23. *Ibid.*, p. 4 24. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

25 See, Patrick Hart, ed. *Thomas Merton/Monk*, (NY, 1974), p. 58.

26 For an account of his death by a group of delegates to the Bangkok Conference, See, *The Asian Journal*, pp. 344-7.

As we pointed out earlier, Merton's pilgrimage to Asia was an effort on his part to deepen his own religious and monastic commitment in the light of Asian religious thought. This is evident from what he said in the inter-faith meeting held in Calcutta in November 1968:

I have come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just facts about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. I seek not only to learn more (quantitatively) about religious and monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself²⁷.

The Asian Journal shows in detail how he quaffed eagerly from the Buddhist experience in his journey to the East, always testing it by the contemplative tradition he knew. He was impressed by the meeting he had with spiritual leaders, especially the Dalai Lama, the head of Tibetan Buddhism. What touched him most in this meeting was their ability to "communicate with one another and share an essentially spiritual experience of Buddhism which is also somehow in harmony with Christianity"²⁸. Merton described his contacts with Asian monks, "very fruitful and rewarding" and in a letter from New Delhi on November 9, 1968, just a month before his death, Merton wrote in part: "I hope I can bring back to my monastery something of the Asian wisdom with which I am fortunate to be in contact – but it is something very hard to put into words"²⁹.

In his dialogue with the East, Merton was extremely free and open. He tuned in on the wave-length of others with remarkable ease and precision. His gift for such uninhibited and free approach has been noted by many people. It is perhaps best attested in the response he got from the Buddhists in Bangkok. The Dalai Lama called him a "Catholic Geshe" which is considered the "highest possible praise from a Gelugpa like an honorary doctorate"³⁰. Chatral Rimpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher was surprised about the nice way he got along with a Christian monk, exclaiming once, "there must be something wrong here"³¹.

The culmination and fulfilment of Merton's trip to Asia could be seen in his visit to Pollonaruwa (an ancient ruined city of palaces, temples etc. in Sri Lanka) where he beheld three statues of Buddha with a kind of mystical charm. Standing before those figures, Merton described with an ecstatic joy and a sense of having found what he was looking for all his life:

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly jerked clear out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks

27. *Ibid.*, 312-313.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 324-5

30. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 144

Kerala-Tamilnadu Priests Retreat Conference

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